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B. M. Hamilton

MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY

MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY

BY L. ALLEN HARKER

AUTHOR OF "A ROMANCE OF THE NURSERY," "CONCERNING PAUL AND FIAMMETTA," "HIS FIRST LEAVE,' ETC.

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"Love is an excellent thing, a great good indeed, which alone maketh light all that is burthensome, and equally bears all that is unequal. For it carrieth a burthen without being burthened, and maketh all that which is bitter sweet and savoury."

THOMAS À KEMPIS.

MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES THEM

"And the kingdom of heaven is of the childlike, of those who are easy to please, who love and who give pleasure."—R. L. S.

JUST as a Royal Princess is known only by her Christian name, so "Miss Esperance" was known to her many friends by hers. It would have seemed an impertinence to add anything more: there was only one Miss Esperance, and even quite commonplace people, deficient in imagination and generally prosaic in their estimate of their acquaintance, acknowledged, perhaps unconsciously, that in Miss Esperance was to be found in marked degree "that hardy and high serenity, distinguishing quality of the truly great."

A little old lady, her abundant white hair demurely parted under the species of white muslin cap known in the North Country as a "mutch," with beautiful, kind eyes, and a fresh pink-and-white complexion, having a slim, long-

waisted figure, always attired in garments something of a cross between those of a Quakeress and a Sister-of-Mercy; a little old lady, who walked delicately and talked deliberately the English of Mr. Addison, who lived in a small square house set in a big, homely garden, on an incredibly small income, and out of that income helped innumerable people poorer than herself, to say nothing of much greater responsibilities undertaken at an age when most of us look for rest and a quiet life.

Long before there was a village of Burnhead at all, that small stone house had stood four-square to all the winds of heaven, and winds are boisterous in that cold North. So lonely had it been, that little house, that far back, beyond the memory of even hearsay, it had been called "Remote." Now the village had crept up round it, but still it stood just a little aloof, alone in its green garden at the end of the straggling village street. And it seemed a singularly suitable setting for Miss Esperance, who also, by reason of her breeding and her dignified, dainty ways, moved wholly unconsciously and gracefully on a somewhat different plane from that of the homely folk amongst whom she spent her simple days.

Such was Miss Esperance; regarded by the inhabitants of her own village, and by such as knew her in the big town on whose outskirts it lay, with something of the possessive pride with which they looked upon their famous castle.

And then there was Mr. Wycherly.

For some years he had lived with Miss Esperance, occupying two rooms on the first floor. A very learned man was he, absorbed in the many books which lined his little sitting-room. Something of a collector, too, with a discriminating affection for first editions and a knowledge concerning them which excelled that of Mr. Donaldson himself, the great second-hand dealer.

The attitude of Miss Esperance towards Mr. Wycherly somewhat resembled that of Miss Betsy Trotwood to Mr. Dick, with this difference—that Mr. Wycherly's lapses from a condition of erudite repose were only occasional. He had what Miss Esperance tenderly called "one foible." On occasion, particularly at such times as he left the safe shelter of the village on a book-hunting expedition in the neighbouring town, "he exceeded" —again I quote Miss Esperance—the temperate tumbler of toddy and single glass of port which she accorded him, and would return in a state of boisterous hilarity, which caused Elsa, the serving-woman, to shake her head and mutter something about "haverals" on his first wavering appearance at the far end of the garden path which led to the front door.

Then would she march upstairs and sternly "turn down" his bed; descending hastily again and, in spite of his protests, trundle him up the staircase, divest him of his boots, nor leave him

till he was safe between the sheets. There he continued to sing lustily till he fell asleep.

He was never otherwise than courteous in his cups; but at such times his usually austere manner would unbend, and he would compare Elsa—who was older than Miss Esperance and extremely hard favoured—to sundry heathen goddesses, eulogizing her eyes and her complexion, and interspersing his compliments with sonorous Latin quotations; for, like Mr. Addison, "his knowledge of the Latin poets, from Lucretius and Catullus down to Claudian and Prudentius, was singularly exact and profound."

Even when most mirthful he sang only two songs—"Here's a Health Unto His Majesty" and "Down Among the Dead Men." In his more sober moments he professed entire ignorance of music.

There were people who said that he was a descendant of the Mr. Wycherly who wrote plays, but he was never heard to claim any such relationship. When he first came to live with Miss Esperance his family and hers almost despaired of him, and even talked of putting him "in a home"; for his "foible" had become a habit, and health and brain were both seriously affected. Then Miss Esperance suggested that he should come to her, and he and his relatives were only too glad to fall in with the suggestion. What he could pay would make things easier for her, and she, if anyone

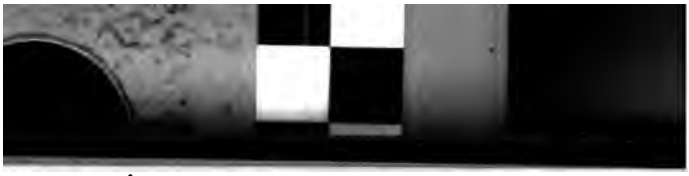
in the world, might reclaim him. But if his friends thought to make things more comfortable for Miss Esperance by the quarterly payments they made for his board and lodging, they were very far wrong. She deducted a few shillings for his rooms, but the rest was most religiously expended upon Mr. Wycherly; and as his health improved, and the fine, keen, scholarly brain reasserted itself, he was only too glad to leave everything to Miss Esperance, never concerning himself so much as to order a pair of boots unless she accompanied him to be measured.

He "exceeded" less and less; his vocal exercises were confined to some four times in the year, and Miss Esperance rejoiced over him as a book-lover rejoices over some rare folio rescued from the huckster's stall to play an honoured part among "the chosen and the mighty of every place and time."

"It is of inestimable advantage to me to be able to listen daily to the instructive conversation of so cultivated a man as my good friend Mr. Wycherly," Miss Esperance would say. "He seems to comprise in his own person the trained intelligence of the ages."

And no matter to whomsoever she said it, he would bow gravely and look impressed. It was surprising what beautiful manners quite uncouth people developed in the society of Miss Esperance.

She had many relations in high places, and



all who crossed her threshold were her life-long friends, eager to serve her; but she would accept pecuniary assistance from none of them.

She and Elsa, the faithful servant and friend of some fifty years, cooked and washed and gardened, caught and groomed the shaggy pony in the little paddock, and cleaned the queer little carriage in which Miss Esperance used to drive into Edinburgh, with a shawl pinned over her bonnet on cold days to protect her ears.

She and Elsa seldom tasted meat except on Sundays. "A man, my dear, is different," she would say when chops were frizzling for Mr. Wycherly; but she always had a meal for a friend, and a good and daintily served meal it was.

When you stayed with Miss Esperance, Elsa would put her head into your bedroom—it seemed in the small hours—demanding loudly, "Will ye tak' a herring or an egg to your breakfast?" And you were wise if you chose the herring, for herrings "brandered" by Elsa were of a succulence unknown to ordinary mortals.

It fell upon a time during Mr. Wycherly's sojourn that one Archie, a young nephew of Miss Esperance, came to visit them, and in no time the jolly young middy, whose ship was anchored at Leith, had made a conquest of them, all three, with his youth, and good looks, and kindly, cheery ways.

Mr. Wycherly heard that a first edition of "Beaumont and Fletcher" was to be seen at some bookseller's in the new town, and set forth early with five pounds in his pocket to see if he could secure such a find.

The day waned, and still no Mr. Wycherly returned triumphant to display his treasure before the admiring eyes of Miss Esperance and "that vastly agreeable youth," as he styled Archie.

Miss Esperance visibly grew more and more anxious, and Archie, who was quite ignorant of Mr. Wycherly's "foible," wondered why his aunt should concern herself that a dignified, middle-aged gentleman had not returned by five o'clock on a spring afternoon. So perturbed did she become that Archie volunteered to go and look for him.

His aunt hesitated, then said slowly: "Dear Archie, I am not sure whether it would be right to let you go. You are very young, and poor dear Mr. Wycherly——"

"Hoots, Miss Esperance," interrupted Elsa from the half-open door, where she had been listening in the most barefaced fashion; "just let the laddie gang: he is better suited to see after yon puir drucken body than you are yersel'!"

With that blessed reticence which characterizes all honest and well-disposed boys, Archie asked no questions. The whole situation "jumped to the eye"; so, kissing his aunt, he

seized his jaunty cap, and was gone before Miss Esperance recovered from her wonder and indignation at Elsa's "meddling."

Archie walked smartly, keeping a sharp look-out to right and left till he reached the outskirts of the town; but he met nobody other than an occasional drover.

Presently he became aware of a little crowd which surrounded someone who was apparently sitting on the curbstone and singing.

The group of rough lads and fisher-girls joined derisively in the chorus of the song, marking the time by means of various missiles more calculated to soil than to injure their target.

With a sense of foreboding curiosity as the discordant "Fal-la-la, la, la la, la" smote upon his ears, Archie squeezed himself into the press under the arms of its tallest members, and to his dismay discovered Mr. Wycherly—hatless, almost coatless, dirty and dishevelled—endeavouring to sing "Here's a Health Unto His Majesty" in very adverse circumstances.

Archie pushed through to his side, saying haughtily: "Don't you see that the gentleman is drunk? Be off, and let me take him home."

But the lads and lassies by no means saw it in that light, and in less time than it takes to write the sentence Archie was engaged single-handed in a free fight with all and sundry, and there seemed every likelihood of his getting decidedly the worst of it.

Fortune favours the brave, however, and a big collier lad, who had been the first to point out Mr. Wycherly's peculiarities of gait and costume to his companions, suddenly sided with Archie, and not only did he succeed in dispersing his quondam friends, but he fetched a "hackney coach" and lifted Mr. Wycherly bodily into it.

The "Beaumont and Fletcher" had proved to be a reprint, and Mr. Wycherly had drowned his sorrows in the flowing bowl.

* * * * *

At twenty-two, with nothing but his pay to live upon, Archie married a pretty girl, whose face was her sole fortune. Two charming little boys were born to them in the next seven years; then Archie and his wife both died of typhoid fever at Portsmouth.

There were no living near relatives on either side, but kindly strangers forwarded a letter, written by Archie a week before his death, to Miss Esperance.

She was then nearly seventy years old, but in this matter she did not even consult Mr. Wycherly. She merely informed him of what had occurred, and announced her speedy departure for Portsmouth "to fetch dear Archie's children home."

She had not left her own house for a single night in fifteen years.

Mr. Wycherly took her frail, beautiful old hand in his, and raised it to his lips. As he

laid it down, he said beseechingly: "You will let me act as joint-guardian with you to Archie's children? I will undertake the education of those boys myself—it will be a great interest for me."

"They will indeed be fortunate boys!' said Miss Esperance, and she raised such beautiful, trustful eyes to her old friend, that he was fain to kiss her hand again and hasten from the room.

Shortly afterwards he left the house, and might have been seen hurrying along the road in the direction of Edinburgh, with a large and seemingly heavy parcel under his arm.

He was not long away, and he walked steady and straight, but all the same he sang softly under his breath, "and he that will this health deny," as he shut the garden gate with a clang and hurried towards the house.

Miss Esperance was standing in the little hall dressed for driving, looking pale and perturbed. She, too, had a parcel, a small square parcel, and Elsa was evidently remonstrating, for Mr. Wycherly heard her say as he came up: "It's just fair redeeklus, and onny o' them would be just prood to be askit—an' me wi' all yon wages lyin' idle i' the bank these thirty year!"

She paused abruptly as Mr. Wycherly appeared in the open door. Elsa had sharp ears, in spite of her years, and the last "let him lie" sent her up the staircase as fast as her old legs would carry her.

"Miss Esperance," said Mr. Wycherly, "we

start this afternoon. See, I have bought the tickets," and he waved them triumphantly. "I have made all our arrangements. We shall reach Portsmouth about midday to-morrow, and there is plenty of money for present expenses, so please"—he took the little square parcel from her very gently, and reached it up to Elsa, who stood on the top step of the curly staircase. Through the paper he felt it was the little leather jewel-case that had been her mother's. "We could *not* allow that, Miss Esperance!" he continued. "Journeys are a man's business."

Miss Esperance sat down on the only chair in the hall and began to cry.

Next day, when they were far away, and Elsa was dusting Mr. Wycherly's books—he took them out and dusted them himself three times a week; there were no glass doors, for he said he could not bear "to see his friends through a window"—she came on several gaps in the well-filled shelves. "The right edition of Gerard" was nowhere to be seen. The long row of "kind-hearted play-books" was loose in the shelf, for "Philip Massinger" was a-missing; and in the sacred place devoted to "first folios" there was a yawning chasm.

Elsa paused, duster in hand. "She maun never ken," she whispered. "They buiks was more to him than her braws is tae a woman. She maun never ken."

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF THE CHILDREN

"A sudden rush from the stairway,
A sudden raid from the hall;
By three doors left unguarded
They enter my castle wall."

LONGFELLOW.

ELSA had barely finished dusting Mr. Wycherly's books when Lady Alicia Carruthers walked over from the "big hoose" to see if she could be of any use. People found Elsa more approachable in this respect than Miss Esperance, and often seized such times as they had seen the mistress pass in her little pony carriage to tackle the maid as to whether anything could be done to increase the old lady's comfort without her knowledge.

And now that the news of her journey, and its reason, had flamed through the village with all the wonder of a torchlight procession, it was only what Miss Esperance herself would have described as "fitting" that the chief lady in it should be first in the field to offer her services.

Very managing was Lady Alicia, strong, kind-hearted, dictatorial; mother of many children,

and inclined to regard all the rest of the world as being equally in need of supervision.

"What on earth will she do with two wee things like that?" she cried to Elsa, as that worthy met her in the passage. "One's but a baby, isn't he?"

"Two years and one month," answered Elsa cheerfully. "He'll be walkin', onny way."

"You know the little room leading from Miss Esperance's into the passage; you must put them both there," said Lady Alicia decidedly. "Have you got any beds? But of course you haven't. I'll send a bed for the older boy and a crib for the baby, and bedding, and sheets; and I've found the very girl to look after them —Robina Tod, a good, douce lassie. You'll remember her mother, Elsa?"

"I ken her fine," said Elsa slowly. "But, yer leddyship, d'ye think Miss Esperance will consent? And whaur would the lassie sleep?"

"Miss Esperance just *must* consent. Robina will be thankful to come to get trained and for her food, and she must come at six in the morning, and go home at night to sleep after they are bedded. You must manage Miss Esperance in this, Elsa; she will be so bewildered at having children here at all at first that you'll find it easier than you expect. What does *she* know of the wants of little children? Just you tell her that you made arrangements because she hadn't time."

Elsa stood fingering her apron, and made no

answer, nor did she look at Lady Alicia, who was looking hard at her.

"Come now, Elsa, you know there's nothing for it but to give in gracefully. They must sleep somewhere, poor lambs, and you can't put an infant in a four-post bed."

"I'm thinkin'," said Elsa, slowly, "that Master Montagu will have to sleep in the big bed, for yon room will never hold three beds, and Miss Esperance would never part wi' yon that's in there."

"Very well, then, I will only send the crib, and a bath and Robina and—anything else that comes into my head. You understand, Elsa?"

"I'll no promise Miss Esperance 'll keep onny o' it, but you'll jest see. If it pleases ye to send the bits o' things, it's no for me to say ye nay."

Here Elsa raised her head and looked straight at Lady Alicia, and they understood one another perfectly.

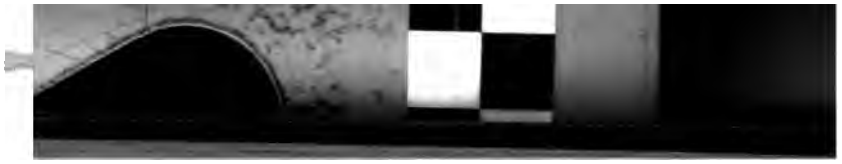
When, later in the afternoon, Robina, a rosy-cheeked lass of sixteen, appeared in a spring cart, along with the crib and a variety of other useful things, Elsa received her with but grudging courtesy, and might have been heard to mutter, as she went about the house: "There's some folk that simply canna keep their fingers out o' other folk's business, and the worst o't is, that one must just thole't."

* * * * *

It is one of the eternal verities that no man knows what he can do till he tries. Mr. Wycherly suddenly developed a "handiness" with regard to babies that surprised himself, and caused Miss Esperance to regard him with almost worshipful astonishment.

Montagu, the elder boy, fitted into his new surroundings at once. He was a thoughtful, dreamy child, gentle and biddable, with an inborn love of books that immediately endeared him to Mr. Wycherly. But the baby, Edmund, was a strenuous person of inquiring mind, who toddled and crawled and tumbled into every corner of the little house; who poked his fat fingers into the mustard, the ink, and the mangle impartially; who pulled Mr. Wycherly's heaviest books out of the shelves, and built a tower with them, which fell upon and almost buried him in the ruins, whence, howling dismally, he was rescued by Mr. Wycherly himself, only consenting to be comforted when that gentleman "gappled" with him round the garden, Edmund sitting enthroned upon his shoulders, and admonishing him to "gee up."

"Walking" indeed! I should think he *was* walking—swarming, climbing, crawling, tumbling in every unimaginable direction, and celebrating his innumerable accidents by vociferous outcries which invariably brought the whole household to his assistance. Robina, who, in spite of Elsa's fears, had been retained as the children's attendant, declared that Master



Edmund was "ayont her," but Elsa, manifesting a wholly unexpected toleration for mischief of all kinds, declared him to be a "wee, stumpin', stoozie" after her own heart.

Lady Alicia proved to be right. Miss Esperance, on her return with the children, expressed no objection to any of the preparations they had made for her. Furthermore, she accepted gratefully, and with a dignified humility very affecting to those who knew her, the offers of "help with the children" that poured in upon her from all sides.

"For myself, it was only fitting that I should be somewhat reserved," she gently explained to Elsa when that honest woman exclaimed in surprise at her meek acceptance of so much neighbourly "interference." "But dear Archie's children are different: I have no right to refuse kindness towards them. And my good friends have been so wonderfully kind. And as for you, Elsa, you are the most wonderful of all—look how little Edmund loves you!"

Elsa exclaimed: "Tuts havers," and hastened back to the kitchen, where she relieved her feelings by making more of the gingerbread "pussies" beloved of Baby Edmund.

Mr. Wycherly found his learned leisure considerably curtailed by the new arrivals. Both Montagu and Edmund (it was curiously characteristic of the household that the children were "Montagu" and "Edmund" from the first, never "Monty" or "Baby") infinitely

preferred his society to that of Robina, even though she was so much nearer their own age. Children are very quick to see where they may tyrannize, and gentle, scholarly Mr. Wycherly, who had loved few people, and those few so dearly, fell an easy victim to "dear Archie's boys."

Montagu was called after him, but if on this score the elder boy may seem to have had more claim on his attention than Baby Edmund, the little brother made up in what Montagu called "demandliness" for what he may have lacked in legitimate pretension.

Even in a very large house it is impossible to conceal the presence of children. They are of all human creatures the most ubiquitous, the least repressible. Wherever they are, they betray themselves in a thousand ways no foresight can presage. Their very belongings seem possessed of their own all-pervading spirit, and toys and small shed garments have a way of turning up in the most unlikely places.

When, three days after the little boys arrived at Remote, Mr. Wycherly discovered an absurd small glove with holes in every finger, shut inside the "Third Satire of Horace," he remembered to have heard Elsa loudly rebuking the lass, Robina, for having suffered it to get lost. He took it out and looked at it, fingering it with wistful wonder and tenderness; then, almost guiltily, he put it back again and closed the book, apologizing to himself with the reflection that it really was quite worn out.

The spare bedroom with the four-post bed was next to Mr. Wycherly's, and as it was the only room in Remote that was possible as a night nursery, he heard in the early morning all sorts of mysterious sounds connected with the toilet of the two small boys. The little high voices: Baby Edmund's bubbling laugh that was exactly like the beginning of a thrush's song; equally often, Baby Edmund's noisy outcries when things displeased him; Robina's pleadings, and the gentle counsels of Miss Esperance—all these things smote upon the ears of Mr. Wycherly as he lay in bed waiting for the big can of hot water which every morning Elsa dumped down outside his door that he might take the chill off his bath. This matutinal bath was something of a grievance with Elsa, who considered it as a part of Mr. Wycherly's general "fushionlessness" that he should require so much more washing than other folk.

Thus did she always set down the can with a thump, and perform a species of tattoo on Mr. Wycherly's door, exclaiming loudly: "Here's yer bawth watter—sir," the "sir" always following after a pause, for it was only added out of deference to continual admonishment on the part of Miss Esperance, who thought that Elsa's manner to Mr. Wycherly was frequently lacking in respect, as indeed it was. She could never be got to look upon him as other than a poor, silly pensioner of her mistress.

A few days after the children arrived, Mr. Wycherly was awakened by the voice of Edmund in the next room vociferously demanding "Man." Mr. Wycherly sat up in bed and listened.

"Want man, want to see man."

Murmured remonstrances from Robina, laboured explanations as to the impossibility of beholding any man when he was still in his bed.

"Want man, want to see man," in tones ever growing louder and more decided from Baby Edmund.

This went on for about half an hour, while all the time Mr. Wycherly lay awake listening and longing to get up and join the little person who showed so flattering a desire for his society, but that he dared not do till Elsa brought his hot water. At last it came—dumped down as usual in resounding impact with the floor, while Elsa knocked loudly with her wonted vibrant announcement.

Mr. Wycherly was just preparing to get up when there were new and strange sounds outside his door—rustlings and whisperings and curious uncertain fumblings with the handle. Suddenly the door was pushed open, to show the children standing on the threshold behind the hot-water can.

"Man! man! Me see man in bed," cried Edmund, jumping up and down gleefully. He made a plunge forward to reach Mr. Wycherly, and, of course, fell up against the can, which upset while the baby capsized on to the top of

it. The water was hot, and the baby was very frightened; so was Mr. Wycherly. As loud wails rent the air he leaped out of bed to rush to the rescue, only to skip back again with even greater haste as he heard Elsa and Robina on the stairs. Edmund was picked up and carried off, Robina volubly explaining how she had only left them for a minute. Mr. Wycherly's door was banged to indignantly as though *he* was entirely to blame, and the hot water continued to stream gaily over the carpet.

Mr. Wycherly stood in great awe of Elsa. Here was a most tremendous mess, and so long as he was in bed no one could or would come to his assistance. He arose hastily, arrested the flow of the stream in one direction with his big bath sponge, sopped up the water as well as he could, and concluded the operation by the employment of all his towels.

Presently there came a new thump on his door. "Have ye moppet it up?" asked Elsa anxiously.

"As well as I could," Mr. Wycherly replied humbly. "I don't think it will soak through to the room below——"

"Pit oot the can, an' I'll bring ye some mair hot watter—sir."

Standing well behind the door Mr. Wycherly opened it gingerly, and handed out the can. It was brought back full in no time, and again he heard Elsa's voice, thus adjuring him: "Ye'd better mak' a steer or yer breakfast will be spilet —sir."

Poor Mr. Wycherly did his best to make a "steer," but his towels were a sodden mass, and it is not easy to dry oneself, even with a selection of the very largest handkerchiefs. His toilet was assuredly less careful than usual, for he was very anxious about little Edmund, although the sounds of woe had ceased in a very short time after the catastrophe of the hot-water can. Mr. Wycherly's sitting-room was across the landing from his bedroom, but before he went to breakfast he hastened downstairs to ask after Edmund's welfare.

He knocked at the parlour door, and on being bidden to enter discovered that lusty infant jumping up and down on the horsehair sofa, while Miss Esperance sat on its very edge to make sure that he should not take a sudden dive on to the floor.

"I do hope he was not hurt——" Mr. Wycherly began.

"Man, man; me go to man!" Edmund cried before his aunt could answer; and scrambling off the sofa, he raced across the room to Mr. Wycherly. He held up his arms, exclaiming: "Uppee, uppee!" and, of course, was lifted up. "Ta, ta," he remarked, smiling benignly upon Miss Esperance from this eminence; "me go wiv man."

He waved a fat hand to his aunt, and kicked Mr. Wycherly in the waistcoat to hasten their departure. Mr. Wycherly wavered.

"No, Edmund," said Miss Esperance, "you

cannot go with Mr. Wycherly now; he is going to his breakfast."

"Bretfus!" echoed Edmund in joyful tones; "me go bretfus, too, wiv man."

"I would like to come too," Montagu interpolated, hastily clutching at Mr. Wycherly's coat.

"May I take them?" that gentleman pleaded. "It would be very agreeable to have their society at breakfast."

"I doubt it," said Miss Esperance; "but since you are so very kind—for this once—and if you find them too much, just ring."

The joyful procession was already mounting the steep, curly staircase, and "Bretfus—man!" resounded cheerily in the distance till Mr. Wycherly's door was shut.

Miss Esperance sat where she was on the edge of the sofa. She was very tired, for she had been up since five o'clock; moreover, her own breakfast had been of the slightest, so busy was she superintending that of the children. Her head felt swimmy, and the familiar room seemed unreal and strange. The sudden silence after the ceaseless and noisy activity of Baby Edmund was restful and consoling. Elsa and Robina were upstairs busy making beds and emptying baths.

Miss Esperance felt so exhausted that she even folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes—a thing she never did in the day except sometimes on a Sabbath afternoon. She

did not lean back, for she belonged to that vanished school of old ladies who considered that to loll was akin to something positively disreputable: bed was the only place where it was proper to repose. Sofas were for the invalid or the indolent, and easy-chairs for menfolk and such-like feeble spirits as were indulgent to the frailties of the flesh.

"As thy days, so shall thy strength be," whispered Miss Esperance. The precepts and promises by which she had ruled her gentle life did not fail her now in her need: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint."

She opened her eyes. Once more the room looked homely and familiar; the pictures on the walls had ceased to chase each other in a giddy round. She unclasped her hands and rose. "I'd better go and see what those bairns are doing," she thought to herself; "it's not fair to leave them with him for long."

She mounted the steep stairs and paused on the landing to listen. The only sound to be heard was a sort of munching. Then, in Edmund's decisive voice: "Maw toas."

Another pause. "Bacon all dawn," in tones of sorrowful conviction. Silence again for a minute, then: "Maw mink."

A gurgle, and a hasty movement, evidently on the part of Mr. Wycherly.

"He always pours it down his chin if he holds it himself," said Montagu, in a slightly reproving voice.

A sound of rubbing. "Toas all dawn," mournfully, from Edmund.

Miss Esperance opened the door. The two children were sitting on either side of Mr. Wycherly at his round table. Edmund's chubby face was liberally besmeared with bacon-fat, and the board had been cleared of every sort of eatable except a small "heel" of loaf and a pot of marmalade, which neither of the children liked. It was Oxford marmalade and very bitter.

"Have they been good?" Miss Esperance inquired anxiously.

Mr. Wycherly looked somewhat flushed and perturbed, but he hastened to reply: "They have been model children — but" — here he hesitated—"do you think they had enough to eat downstairs? They seemed so exceedingly hungry, and it would be so dreadful. . . ."

"Hungry?" Miss Esperance repeated incredulously. "Hungry? They had each a large bowl of porridge and milk, and bread and jam after that."

"Maw dam," Edmund immediately struck in; "'at nasty dam!" and he pointed a scornful fat finger at the pot of marmalade.

Here Robina appeared opportunely to take them for a walk. Edmund roared at the top of his voice at being reft from his beloved man. But Miss Esperance was firm.

When Elsa had cleared away Mr. Wycherly's breakfast, he found it unusually difficult to concentrate his mind upon his work dealing with Aristotle's Nikomachean Ethics. Like Miss Esperance, he had had very little breakfast. Two rashers of bacon had Elsa provided, and the usual four pieces of toast. Each little boy had had a rasher. Edmund had eaten three pieces of toast and Montagu the fourth. Edmund also drank all the milk that he did not spill. Mr. Wycherly was fain to content himself with a cup of exceedingly black tea and one small piece of bread. But he was quite unconscious that he had eaten less than usual. So shaken was he out of his customary dreamy calm that he decided to go for a walk. He did not confess to himself that he hoped he might meet the children while he was out.

CHAPTER III

THE EDUCATION OF MR. WYCHERLY

"For what are all our contrivings,
And the wisdom of our books,
When compared with your caresses,
And the gladness of your looks?"
LONGFELLOW.

FOR several days Mr. Wycherly's privacy was not again invaded before breakfast, though he heard through the wall continual and loudly-expressed demands to visit "man" from his friend of the curly pate and strap shoes. One morning, however, Robina's suspicions as to Edmund's propensity for roving were lulled into security by particularly exemplary conduct on his part during the time of dressing; and she slipped downstairs to give a hand with the breakfast, leaving the children safely shut in their nursery.

No sooner had she departed than Montagu, of whom people expected better things, suggested that they should go and visit Mr. Wycherly next door. The morning hours had been so unusually quiet that that gentleman

was still dozing, although Elsa had already brought his hot water. When he heard the now unmistakable fumbling with the door-handle, which always proclaimed the advent of the children, he called out: "Come in, but for Heaven's sake mind the hot-water can."

In they came, without accident of any kind, as Elsa had taken the precaution of placing the can well on the hinge side of the door. Very fresh and spick and span did the two little boys look in clean blue pinafores, and shining morning faces. Edmund made a dash for Mr. Wycherly, with his usual joyful cry of "Uppee! uppee!" Montagu hastily banged the door after him to keep Robina out, and he, too, climbed up on Mr. Wycherly's bed. The soft, indescribable fragrance of clean children was supremely pleasurable to Mr. Wycherly, and excited strange, unfamiliar stirrings of recollections, long buried but by no means dead, of his own nursery days in the old house in Shropshire, where he and his brothers were brought up.

But there was no time to indulge in retrospect, for Edmund had already settled the programme. "Sing!" he commanded. "Sing, man!"

"I fear," Mr. Wycherly said, somewhat breathlessly, for Edmund was sitting upon that portion of his body known in sporting circles as "the wind," "that I cannot sing, for I don't know any songs."

"Say zen," Edmund cried, jumping up and down upon poor Mr. Wycherly's yielding frame.

"He means you to say him a poem," Montagu explained.

Now of poetry Mr. Wycherly knew plenty, both in Greek and Latin and English, but none of it seemed particularly suitable to the present circumstances, the only lines that came willingly to his call being:

> "Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste" . . .

which he felt would meet with but scant approval from his present audience.

"Say 'ime, say 'ime, man!" cried Edmund, with an ominous droop of the corners of his mouth.

"Say 'Hickory, dickory, dock,'" Montagu suggested kindly: "he likes that; and you tickle him where it runs up, and where it runs down, and at the end, you know."

"But I don't know any poem called 'Hickory, dickory, dock,'" Mr. Wycherly protested despairingly.

"Say 'ime, man! Say dock!" Edmund persisted, punching Mr. Wycherly in the chest to emphasize his wishes. "Say dock. Quit."

"I'll whisper it to you," murmured the helpful Montagu; "it goes like this—'Hickory, dickory, dock.'"

"Hickory, dickory, dock," Mr. Wycherly repeated dutifully and distinctly.

"The mouse ran up the clock," Montagu continued.

"The mouse ran up the clock——"

"But you don't tickle him," Montagu interrupted.

Mr. Wycherly looked at Edmund, and Edmund looked with eager expectation at Mr. Wycherly.

Now to tickle anyone appeared to Mr. Wycherly a most unwarrantable liberty. Such a mode of procedure had never entered into his scheme of life at all. He was not even sure how he ought to set about it. He decided that tickling was altogether out of his province, and he would not experiment even upon Edmund.

He cleared his throat nervously. "Ahem," said Mr. Wycherly. "Hickory, dickory, dock—the mouse ran up the clock——"

"No, no!" shouted Edmund; "ve mouse 'an down."

"The mouse ran down the clock," echoed the obedient Mr. Wycherly.

"No, no!" cried both the little boys; "the clock struck one." Here Edmund gave a most tremendous bounce that really hurt Mr. Wycherly.

"Ve mouse 'an down," he continued, scrabbling with his fingers all over Mr. Wycherly's face, and seizing him by the collar of his night-shirt to burrow in his neck.

"Hickory, dickory, dock," Montagu concluded in a joyful chant. "Now you know it, only you must run up and down, you know."

"Oh, I really cannot do that," Mr. Wycherly expostulated—"not before I am dressed."

Montagu looked puzzled. "You ought to tickle us, you know, like Edmund did, with your fingers; it's quite easy, really."

"Adain!" Edmund commanded, squirming and jumping all over the very softest portions of Mr. Wycherly's person, and causing that patient gentleman acute agony. "Adain!"

"Let us all say it together," Mr. Wycherly gasped, painfully drawing himself a little higher up in the bed; "and do you think you could sit a little more to one side, or a little further forward, or a little lower down, or anywhere except just where you are at present."

"Edmund heavy boy," that youth remarked proudly.

"He is," Mr. Wycherly fervently agreed, "a very heavy boy. Ah, that's better now. . . ."

"Hickory, dickory, dock," was now performed in chorus, and if one of the trio made any mistakes, his companions were making such a row that they did not detect him. At the conclusion of the verse the little boys gave Mr. Wycherly a practical demonstration as to what they meant by tickling.

It was only when the racket had somewhat subsided that they heard Robina's timid voice outside the door bidding the children come at once to their breakfast.

"Det up, man," Edmund directed, "and take me to 'Obina."

"You are perfectly able to trot across to the door," said Mr. Wycherly, mildly remonstrant and much exhausted.

"Come in," shouted Edmund, "come and fesh me."

"No, don't do anything of the kind," cried Mr. Wycherly, horror-struck; "he can quite well come to you."

"I'll surely no come in," said Robina in a slightly offended voice. "They're to come oot at once; the mistress is waitin' breakfast."

"Me tiahed," Edmund announced, languidly lying down beside Mr. Wycherly. "Me tay heah.'

Robina knocked sharply. "Come at once," she cried. "Please, sir, make them come, or the mistress will be rale vexed."

"Go, Montagu," said Mr. Wycherly firmly. "I suppose I must carry this—myself."

Robina, outside, heard much gurgling and giggling on the part of Edmund, as Mr. Wycherly arose and hastily donned his dressing-gown. He carried the struggling baby across to the door, which he had to open widely in order to give his charge into his nurse's arms. Montagu departed with his little brother, but not one moment sooner.

Mr. Wycherly shut and locked his door, only to remember that he had left his hot water outside. When he had secured it and again made the door fast, he sank upon his bed: "I must certainly lock my door overnight," he reflected; "to be tickled is a really dreadful experience."

He dressed to the rhythm of "Hickory, dickory, dock," and although the two things had no sort of connection, he found himself thinking of the forget-me-nots on the banks of the Cherwell; they were exactly the colour of Baby Edmund's eyes.

It had already become a matter of course that the children should spend half an hour in Mr. Wycherly's study before they went to bed.

They were left in his charge while Robina got things ready for the night, and he strove to make the time pass pleasantly for them by every means in his power. Edmund's requests were occasionally a little difficult to understand, as, although his speech was fluent and his vocabulary singularly large for his age, he had a habit of omitting any consonant that was troublesome to pronounce. Both "l" and "r" were of this number. He did not attempt to provide a substitute, but simply left the letter out, and nothing delighted old Elsa more than to hear him repeat after her—"'ound the 'ugged 'ock the 'adical 'ascals 'an."

Mr. Wycherly did his best to correct this defect in Edmund's speech, and on this particular evening was showing him a picture-book of coloured animals.

"Poor little Edmund can't say lion," he said sadly, apropos of a picture of the king of beasts.

"He can say tigah," that infant rejoined cheerfully. "No maw pitchers. Man make a 'abbit;" and Edmund scrambled off Mr.

Wycherly's knee the better to behold the feat in question.

Mr. Wycherly shook his head hopelessly, while Montagu shyly explained: "He means a rabbit out of a handkerchief, you know. Daddie always did it; and it ran up his arm and jumped so. *Do* make one!"

Mr. Wycherly almost groaned. He hadn't the faintest notion how to make a rabbit, and felt that he had lived in vain. He proposed building a tower with some bricks that the children had brought with them, but Edmund would have none of such well-worn devices. He persisted in his demands for "a 'abbit," growing more and more vociferous, till his wishes culminated in a roar that brought Robina to the rescue and to Mr. Wycherly's door, whence she bore Edmund away wailing dismally.

Mr. Wycherly, helpless and distressed, looked appealingly at Montagu, who only said rather reproachfully: "You might *learn* to make a rabbit, you know," and followed Robina.

Almost unconsciously the student's eyes sought the bookshelves where generally was to be found any information that he wanted; but among the familiar calf-bound backs there was not one that seemed to promise any information about the manufacture of rabbits, and for the first time Mr. Wycherly felt dissatisfied with a scholarship that seemed to ignore so many possible contingencies in a

man's life. Of what use was the utmost familiarity with Aristotle's Politics if an indignant baby could put one so wholly out of countenance? For a few minutes he moved restlessly about the room, then he took his hat and went out.

He had a vaguely formulated plan in his head that he would knock at the door of every house in the village till he found somebody capable of instructing him in the art of making rabbits, for learn he would, even if he had to advertise in the *Scotsman* for a teacher.

As he walked down the road leading to the village he met the minister, who immediately remarked that something or other was amiss. Whether Edmund had ruffled Mr. Wycherly's hair and neckcloth as well as his equanimity is not known, but it is certain that the Rev. Peter Gloag thought him looking less "Oxfordish" than usual, and stopped him to ask kindly:

"Nothing wrong up at the house I hope?"

"No, I thank you," said Mr. Wycherly, stopping in his turn. "At least—— I wonder, now, if *you* happen to know of anyone who can make rabbits out of handkerchiefs?"

The minister stared at Mr. Wycherly as though for a moment he feared for his reason, then he looked as if he were about to laugh, when quite suddenly his face changed, and the eyes under his bushy eyebrows were wonderfully kind and gentle as he said:

"You'll hardly believe it, but I can do something in that sort myself. I used often to make them when the bairns were wee."

"My dear friend," Mr. Wycherly exclaimed delightedly, "can you really? But of course you can; you have children of your own. Why didn't I think of you at the very first? Are you pressed for time at present? Could you return with me now, at once?"

For answer the minister turned and walked with Mr. Wycherly towards Remote, and not only did he teach him how to make the most lively and enchanting of rabbits, but he also instructed him how to originate one "Sandy," who sat on the manipulator's hand, whose arms were worked by his fingers, a creature of infinite jest and dexterity. Mr. Wycherly was not half so elated when he got the Newdigate as when he achieved this latter feat.

But, oh dear me! Mr. Wycherly had a tremendous deal to learn. Every day was he confronted with new deficiencies in his education. The constant demand for songs was most embarrassing; even Miss Esperance seemed to fail the children here, for although she knew innumerable psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and endless and delightful Scottish ballads, yet her repertoire of purely nursery ditties was but small. It was heart-rending to Mr. Wycherly when, during their first days at Remote, Edmund would remark

reproachfully anent his inability to sing some hitherto unheard-of nursery song: "Mamma singed it." And the eyes of Miss Esperance would fill with tears at the thought of these two little ones bereft of their young parents, who seemed to have been so light-hearted, so ready to sing upon every possible occasion. No books of nursery rhymes had come with the children from Portsmouth. Perhaps they were forgotten in the hurry of their departure. Perhaps they did not exist; where was the need, with a girl-mother whose store of such ditties seemed inexhaustible? It did not occur either to Miss Esperance or Mr. Wycherly that such books could be purchased. It is true that the latter received many catalogues, but they mostly concerned learned works dealing with the more obscure of the Latin authors.

Miss Esperance possessed a whole shelf of little "Gilt Books," which had belonged to her mother and herself, and Mr. Wycherly feverishly rummaged among these to find some childish lore suitable for the little boys, with the result that he became exceedingly interested in the books, from an antiquarian point of view, and forgot his original quest. They were most of them published by John Newbery, the philanthropic bookseller in St. Paul's Churchyard, who bought the MS. of the "Vicar of Wakefield" for sixty pounds, and kept it two years before he published it. One find, however, he did make—a tiny two-inch "Cries of

London, as they are Exhibited in the Streets. With an Epigram in Verse adapted to each. Embellished with sixty-two elegant Cuts." Some of these epigrams found much favour with the children, as "My Old Soul, will you Buy a Bowl?" "Who Buys my Pig and Plumb Sauce?" or

> "Who liveth so merry in all this land,
> As doth the poor widow that selleth the sand?
> And ever she singeth, as I can guess,
> Will you buy any sand, any sand, mistress?"

He also discovered among the verses of that most genial and childlike of poets, Robert Herrick, many rhymes that delighted the children, a special favourite being the old watch rhyme:

> "From noise of scare-fires rest ye free,
> From murders, Benedicite.
> From all mischances that may fright
> Your pleasing slumbers in the night,
> Mercy secure ye all, and keep
> The goblin from ye while ye sleep.
> Past one o'clock, and almost two,
> My masters all, good-day to you."

Mr. Wycherly was a little put to it to explain the "Goblin," as he would not for the world have told the children anything that might frighten them. He passed it over lightly as "a bad dream," and when Montagu further demanded what that was, Mr. Wycherly felt inexpressibly comforted at the child's ignorance; he had dreamed so many evil dreams himself.

Summer had passed, the late September days were drawing in, but it was still almost hot, as it often is in autumn in the North. Even Mr. Wycherly, who was always cold, admitted that the weather had remained agreeably mild; and when Lady Alicia came, and partly by means of bluster and partly by reason of prolonged petitioning, succeeded in carrying off Miss Esperance to dine at the "Big Hoose," Mr. Wycherly seconded her efforts nobly. She had asked Mr. Wycherly, too, but he never went anywhere, and on this occasion he had pointed out that his presence made it perfectly safe for Miss Esperance to leave the children. He would sit with his door open, so that he could hear the faintest sound in the children's room; he would go and see them last thing—"And hear them say their prayers," Miss Esperance anxiously interpolated; he would do everything that Miss Esperance usually did.

"Now, there's nothing whatever can happen to those children," said Lady Alicia, as they drove away. "They're both looking as brown and bonny as they can well look, and once they're in their beds, they'll just sleep the round of the clock. As for you, my dear, you've hardly been out of the house since they came, and it's very bad for you."

As a rule, the children did sleep the round of the clock, but on this particular evening, although they went to sleep directly they were

"bedded," as Robina put it, and she had gone home for the night, while Elsa had retired to the back door for her gossip with the minister's maid, Edmund took it into his head to wake up.

Mr. Wycherly was sitting in his arm-chair reading "Marius the Epicurean." It was one of his many imperfections, in the eyes of the inhabitants of Burnhead, that he was known to revel in the works of "yon man, Pater." The very name seemed redolent of papistry, even if the man himself did not happen to be a Papist, and it was known that the Rev. Peter Gloag did not approve of his writings. In an English village nobody would have concerned himself as to what anybody read, the amount of reading done at all being quite a negligible quantity; but in a Scottish village, where the cobbler probably reads the *Saturday Review* and the works of Carlyle are as household words, people regard the reading of their neighbours.

The light from the lamp fell full on Mr. Wycherly's white hair and regular, scholarly profile, and the figure in the chair made a pleasant picture of erudite repose. There was something clear-cut and delicately finished about everything connected with Mr. Wycherly's appearance. One long, slim hand, with exquisitely-tended nails, held his book; the other kept up a noiseless rhythmic beat upon the arm of his chair.

Suddenly he heard a little sound—an inde-

scribable small sound as of some soft body moving. He laid down his book and leant forward to listen. Again he heard it, and with a request for "Obina." It was not a cry; it was rather a curious, tentative flinging of the word into space to see what would happen.

The children's door was closed, but not fastened. Mr. Wycherly's was wide open, and he immediately hurried across the landing to the children's room. The light from his lamp, exactly opposite to their door, shone in as he pushed it open, showing a fair curly head and a pair of bright eyes appearing above the side of the cot. Montagu was still fast asleep.

"Lie down, my child," Mr. Wycherly whispered; "it is night-time. You must go to sleep again."

"No," said Edmund firmly but kindly; "you must take me."

Mr. Wycherly looked at the wide-awake mutinous person in the cot, then he looked at the peacefully sleeping Montagu in the big, four-post bed. To engage in argument with Edmund meant the inevitable waking of his brother; for there would be tears, perhaps loud outcries, which would bring Elsa, scornful and capable, to his assistance.

It is to be feared that in some respects Mr. Wycherly was a weak man. He would do anything to avoid a disturbance, almost anything to avoid an argument. Small wonder, then, that he was despised in Burnhead, where

argument flourished as the green bay-tree, and was the chief object of social intercourse.

He wrapped Edmund in his quilt, carried him across to the study, and sat down in his big chair with the deliciously warm, naughty bundle on his knee. Edmund blinked at the bright light, wriggled his arms out of the en wrapping counterpane, and remarked, "Bikky," in a tone whose subtly seductive combination of command and supplication Mr. Wycherly never could resist. The children had not been three months in the house without teaching him to keep a store of biscuits in his cupboard. When Edmund was duly supplied, he leant his head luxuriously against Mr. Wycherly's shoulder, saying sleepily: "Say, deah man; say anysing."

This was gracious of Edmund, and Mr. Wycherly had already discovered that when the baby was sleepy he did not cavil even at Latin verse. Mr. Wycherly had a singularly musical voice; and as he "said" the biscuit dropped from Edmund's hand and his head lay heavy on the kind shoulder that supported it. As the reciter reached the lines: "*Dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo, Dulce loquentem,*" he discovered, to his joy, that Edmund was asleep. Softly he repeated the musical last two lines again, smiling down at the little figure in his arms. But it was not of Lalage that Mr. Wycherly was thinking.

He succeeded in putting Edmund into bed

without waking him, and just as he had got back to his study he heard Miss Esperance come in.

Softly he closed the door, so that it only stood open a little way, and seated himself once more in his favourite chair. If all was quiet, it was quite unlikely Miss Esperance would come to speak to him that night. She would go straight to her little bedroom next that of the children. He heard her door shut. Mr. Wycherly rubbed his hands together quite gleefully. "I really am learning how to manage those children," he said.

CHAPTER IV

THE SECRETIVENESS OF MAUSE

"A boy and a dog together will go;
You may jail them or chain them: they will
have it so."

ANON.

MAUSE was the bob-tailed sheep-dog that lived in a kennel at the side of the house nearest the back door, to keep guard. Like Miss Esperance and Mr. Wycherly and Elsa, she was not in her first youth; and when the children came Miss Esperance was nervously apprehensive as to the old dog's conduct. Would she be jealous and growl at them, or perhaps even fly out at them from her kennel as she did at the village boys if they ventured into the garden for any illegitimate purpose? A good watch-dog was Mause, with more discrimination in her vigilance than is displayed by every dog. She never barked at poor old Mistress Dobie, who would come humbly to the back door for her bi-weekly handful of meal and a screw of snuff, who looked a very scarecrow of shabbiness and tapped with her staff as she walked; but

Mause did bark, and bark loudly, only pausing every now and then to growl thunderously at the very grand gentleman who tried to sell Elsa an inferior sewing-machine on the hire system. And when he returned a few weeks later with Bibles, Mause nearly broke her chain in her frantic attempts to reach him. The poor dog was kept chained up for the greater part of the day, which is never improving to the canine temper even when, as in this case, the chain is a long one. Miss Esperance let her run by the pony trap whenever she drove into Edinburgh, but this was by no means every day, and Elsa rather grudged poor Mause even these occasional absences, and generally put the chains on both doors when she had gone.

"A watch-dog sud be there to guard the hoose," said Elsa, "and no gang stravaigin aff for hoors at a stretch."

Mr. Wycherly took Mause for a walk whenever he went for one himself, and she greatly enjoyed these excursions, which were, however, but fleeting joys, for Mr. Wycherly's walks were by no means prolonged. That he should go for walks at all was, in the eyes of the villagers of Burnhead, but another sign of his general futility and "genty ways," like his bath and the wooden feet in three pieces that he liked kept in his boots "just as if he was feart some ither body sud wear them." Besides, what could a man who hardly ever stirred abroad want with six pairs of boots? The folk

in the village pitied Elsa that she had to give in to such havers.

On rare occasions Mause managed to sneak into the house with Mr. Wycherly and secrete herself in his room; but he did not encourage these clandestine visits, for when Elsa discovered her—as she invariably did—she drove the poor beast forth with much contumely, and Mr. Wycherly was haunted for hours afterwards by the reproach in the eyes of Mause that he had not found the courage to take her part.

Yet Mause was fond of Elsa, and in her heart of hearts Elsa loved Mause. She would far sooner have gone without her own meals than have omitted the plate of broken biscuit and bones that she carried twice daily to the kennel. Every day she filled the dog's tin with fresh water, and she brushed the thick shaggy coat as religiously, and even more vigorously, than she brushed Mr. Wycherly's clothes. It grieved her rather that the latter, like Mause, wore the same coat week-days and Sundays.

Mause was meekness and gentleness itself with the dwellers at Remote, but outsiders gave her a very different character, and the Rev. Peter Gloag even went so far as to remonstrate with Miss Esperance for keeping such a savage brute about the place. Not that Mause had ever actually bitten even a man selling sewing-machines, but she had a way of barking and bouncing, of growling and gyrating at the full length of her chain that was decidedly

alarming, and if she happened to be loose, her swift rush to the gate at the sound of a strange footstep was disconcerting in the extreme. What would she say to the children?

"If she's ill-natured with them, she'll have to go, poor beastie," Miss Esperance had said, as they drove from the station with the two tired, cross little boys on that first day. "She's a dear, faithful animal, but I could not let such wee things be frightened."

However, the fears of Miss Esperance were groundless. From the first moment that she beheld the little boys, Mause took them under her protection. Perhaps it was that neither of the children showed the slightest fear of the great, clumsy, shaggy beast, but greeted her with joyful outcries, instantly demanding her release from that harassing chain. The right kind of dog and the right kind of child are friends always, by some immutable, inscrutable law of attraction. It seemed almost as if Mause mistook Montagu and Edmund for the puppies who had been her pride some five years before. And the baby certainly did his very best to confirm her in her mistake. Like a puppy, he had a fondness for carrying off numerous and inconceivably incongruous articles from places where they ought to be to distant parts of the garden, where he would be found surrounded by a selection of improvised playthings, while Mause sat by regarding the work of destruction with her tongue hanging out, and an expression

of maternal pride upon her broad and blurry countenance.

When the children played in the garden their first thought was that Mause must play too. "She must be very lonely in that little wooden house," Montagu said pleadingly. "She would be so happy with us, and we do want her so." And Edmund roared, and refused to be comforted unless his "big bow-wow" might go with him whenever Robina took him out in his perambulator.

There was a little plot of shaven grass in the garden at Remote, and on this Edmund and Mause and Montagu spent many an hour at play, while Robina sat by demurely knitting at a stocking. It was Edmund's habit when he fell down (a somewhat frequent occurrence that did not disturb him in the least unless he happened to fall on "something scratchful") to grasp firmly in each little hand a handful of the dog's thick hair, and by this means pull himself up to his feet again. Mause bore it stoically, and generally turned her patient face that she might lick the small, fat hands that hurt her. And by the time the children had been a month at Remote Mause was only chained up at night.

One hot afternoon in late September Mr. Wycherly had taken Montagu for a walk to a wood near, where there was a tiny tributary of the bigger burn from which the village took its name. So narrow was this stream that

Montagu could jump over it; and it was one of his greatest joys to be taken there and to leap solemnly from one side to the other during a whole afternoon, provided that at each effort his audience made some suitably admirative remark.

Robina's patience failed her after about three demonstrations of Montagu's saltatory prowess, but Mr. Wycherly would take his seat at the foot of a big tree, and with tireless interest notice every jump, finding something new and congratulatory to say after each new effort.

Robina, Edmund, and Mause remained at home, baby and dog disporting themselves upon the little square of turf, while Robina sat in the shade doing the mending. Elsa was busy in the house, and Miss Esperance had gone to a sewing-meeting at the manse.

At the foot of the garden was a low stone wall, and beyond that wall a lane. From that lane presently there came a sound of light-hearted whistling as Sandie, the flesher, his empty butcher's tray borne lightly on his shoulder, returned from the delivery of meat at the "big hoose."

Sandie, the flesher, could see over the wall, and he beheld Robina sitting under the alder-tree. He thought her fair to look upon, and his whistling ceased. Robina gave one hasty glance back at the house. Elsa was making scones, and would be far too busy to look out of the window just then; besides, one could

see very little from the kitchen window save the raspberry canes, as Robina was sadly aware. Edmund and Mause were engaged in an intricate game of ball. They alone knew the rules, but they appeared to find it of absorbing interest. Once more Robina looked back at the house, and then flew down to the bottom of the garden to speak to Sandie.

We all know that there are minutes that seem as hours, and hours that slip by as a single moment of time. Robina's conversation with Sandie was somewhat prolonged, but doubtless for them it passed even as the twinkling of an eye.

When at last she tore herself away from Sandie's blandishments and returned hot-footed to her charge, baby and dog were gone. The worsted ball and the mending lay on the grass, and perfect quiet reigned in the garden of Remote.

"He'll be in mischief somewhere," she said to herself, "the wee Turk!"

For it was only when he was in mischief that the continual flow of Edmund's conversation ceased, and he was traced by his silence rather than by his sounds.

Warily did Robina search through every nook and corner of that garden: behind raspberry canes, between gooseberry bushes, even among the cabbages, but nowhere was there any sign of either child or dog. The girl's heart sank. Edmund had probably gone back

to the house, and Elsa had just kept him that she might the better come down on his young nurse for her carelessness. Robina well knew the awful "radgin" that awaited her if this were the case. It was just possible that the baby had toddled round to the front and was playing among the flower-beds, doing damage in exactly inverse ratio to his size and weight. As she passed the open kitchen window Robina looked in: a great gust of hot air laden with the clean, good smell of newly made scones met her. Elsa was over at the fire giving the scones still on the girdle an occasional poke with her gnarled old finger. Edmund most certainly was not there. Robina's spirits rose. She might escape the "radgin" after all. She ran round to the front, but there was no baby here either; the tidy little garden with its gay flower-beds on either side of the broad central path lay peaceful and deserted in the cool shadow thrown by the house itself. She noticed that the green gate was unlatched, and she began to feel anxious, and not wholly on her own account. Where could that baby have got to, and where in all the world was Mause?

Robina hurried to the back garden again, and went over every inch of ground, with no more success than the first time.

Robina was now very frightened indeed. She hunted in the stable; she looked in the loft; she even took all the tools out of the tool-house lest Edmund might be secreted behind them;

but it was all useless, baby and dog had completely vanished.

All this searching had taken some time. The afternoon began to wane; it would soon be tea-time. Miss Esperance would return from her sewing-meeting, and, even as it was, Robina heard Mr. Wycherly and Montagu come into the house.

She rushed to Elsa in the kitchen, where that worthy woman was arranging her last batch of scones round the top of the wire sieve to cool.

"The wee boy's lost!" cried Robina desperately. "I can find him nowhere and no place, and the dug's awa', too."

Mr. Wycherly and Montagu heard the loud, excited voices in the kitchen, and for the first time in all the years he had spent with Miss Esperance, Mr. Wycherly entered the domain sacred to Elsa. He questioned Robina very gently and quietly, but could obtain no information that threw any light upon Edmund's mysterious disappearance. They searched the house thoroughly, but with no success, and had all four gone out to look once more in the garden, when Montagu exclaimed:

"Why, Mause is *here*, in her kennel, and she's not chained up."

The kennel was a large one, but Mause also was large, and effectually blocked the doorway.

"We'd better take her with us," said Mr.

Wycherly, who was preparing to scour the village. "She'll find him sooner than any of us."

But to their astonishment Mause did not come to call. She refused to budge, and if anyone came near her except Montagu she growled ominously and showed her teeth, a thing she had never done to members of her own household in the whole of her existence.

By this time Miss Esperance had returned, and was gravely disquieted by the news that met her, most of all by the fact that Mause should have deserted Edmund, and that she should be so surly in her temper.

"I can't think what can have come over the dog," cried poor Miss Esperance. "Don't go near her, Montagu, my son. I just wish she was on the chain."

"I'll put the chain on her, auntie; I'm not afraid," cried Montagu, breaking from his aunt's detaining hand; and sure enough Mause made not the smallest objection, but licked Montagu's hand, and gazed with speaking, pathetic eyes at the group round the kennel, although she would allow no one to approach her except the little boy.

"The gate was unlatched when we came in," said Mr. Wycherly. "I noticed that. I think he must have strayed into the village, and we'll probably find him in one of the cottages. What I cannot understand is that Mause should have left him."

"Mebbe some gaun-aboot body's taen him," wailed Robina, "and drove the dug awa'."

"Hoot fie!" cried Elsa indignantly. "They gaun-aboot bodies has plenty bairns o' their ain wi'oot nain o' oors."

"The burn's gey and deep up the rod," sobbed Robina, who was determined to take the gloomiest view of things.

Miss Esperance looked at Mr. Wycherly, and both were very pale. "Elsa and I will go into the village," she said tremulously. "Will you, dear friend, go—the other way? You would be of more use if—anything——"

Miss Esperance paused, unable to voice the dreadful fear that possessed her.

Montagu had sat down on the ground beside Mause, facing the kennel, with his arm round her shaggy neck; he leant his head against her, for he felt that she was in some sort of disgrace and needed comforting. A sudden shaft of sunlight shone full on the pretty group.

"Why, he's in there all the time!" Montagu cried excitedly. "I can see him; he's fast asleep in Mause's kennel, and that's why she wouldn't come out."

The shrill voice woke the baby, who stirred, rolled over, and finally crawled out from his hiding-place, flushed and tumbled with little beads of perspiration all over his nose, Mause politely making way for him the instant he showed a desire to come out.

As he scrambled to his feet he beheld Mr.

Wycherly, and gave his usual cry of "Man! Uppee, uppee!" and was somewhat bewildered by the effusion with which that same man caught him up in his arms. Miss Esperance grasped his fat legs and wept over them; Robina and Elsa caught at any possible portion of his clothing and wept over that. In fact, they all more or less hung on to Mr. Wycherly in their excitement, while the cause of all this enthusiasm blinked his sleepy eyes and wondered what it was all about. Mause ran round and round in a circle, hanging out her tongue and giving occasional short, sharp barks, expressive of approval.

Presently, when the women let go of him, Edmund bent down to scratch one of his fat, pink legs. "I fink," he said majestically, "vat a fee has bited me."

Mause looked apologetic, and licked the spot.

CHAPTER V

ROBINA

"Jenny rade tae Cowtstan, tae Cowtstan, tae Cowtstan;
Jenny rade tae Cowtstan upon a harra'pin O!
An' aye as she wallopit, she wallopit, she wallopit,
An' aye as she wallopit, she aye fell ahin' O!'

Old Song.

For Robina it was a distinct rise in the social scale to have taken service with Miss Esperance. Any lass could get a place at the term in Edinburgh, but only one lass in the whole village could have been chosen to look after the little new-comers at Remote.

In the village Miss Esperance was familiarly known as "the wee leddy," and in the eyes of Burnhead the fact that she lived in an extremely small house with one old servant, and did a large portion of the household work herself, in no way detracted from her dignity. In Burnhead, too, there were people who remembered her father, the Admiral—"A gran' man yon! A radgy man whiles, mind ye, but a rale man. When he gave ye a glass he aye looket the ither way and left ye to help yersen. Eh, but he was a gran' man yon!"

Lady Alicia had described Robina as "douce," and that young woman fully acted up to this reputation during her first weeks at Remote. She trembled and cringed before Elsa. She dropped whatever she happened to be holding if suddenly addressed by Miss Esperance; while in the presence of Mr. Wycherly extreme shyness lent to her appearance an expression of such abject imbecility as caused that gentleman to demand anxiously of her mistress whether she thought it safe to allow Robina to take the children for walks.

Once outside the walls of Remote, however, Robina's whole attitude changed. She bridled, she minced, she was positively swollen with pride in the importance of her position; and when she condescended to exchange remarks with such neighbours as she met, her demeanour was distant and haughty. No sooner had she set forth with Edmund in the perambulator and Montagu trotting by her side than she at once radiated an atmosphere of "say nothing to nobody," so forbidding as to discourage all attempts at sociability except on the part of the boldest. Everybody wanted to see the little boys, who were themselves most frank and friendly, and always ready to respond to the greetings of kindly neighbours.

A comely lass was Robina, sturdy and thickset, but with the exquisite colouring often to be found among the lowland Scottish peasantry; and of late her rosy cheeks had bloomed to a

deeper rose, while her forehead and chin and neck were white as the alder flower growing against the wall at the bottom of the garden. Very blue eyes had Robina, and thick, wavy hair—red hair that would escape from its tight braids in frivolous little curls at the nape of her neck and round her ears. From far away Sandie, the flesher, would espy that brilliant hair burning like a lamp, and wheresoever that beacon shone there would Sandie be fain to follow. He escorted her from her home to Remote in the early morning, and was generally waiting at a safe distance from Remote to walk home with her in the evening. So devoted was he, that Robina had as yet made an exception in his favour, and in spite of her exalted position treated him with moderate friendliness.

The day that Edmund was lost she had got off comparatively lightly. The household was so excited over finding the baby in Mause's kennel that they all forgot to inquire how in the world he had got there without the knowledge of his nurse till some time afterwards. Robina did not consider it necessary to mention her conversation with Sandie, and beyond a moderate amount of cavilling on the part of Elsa very little had been said.

One afternoon during the same week she took the small boys for a walk along the high-road leading to Edinburgh, and as she, with stately mien, was pushing the perambulator

on the pathway, a young man driving a light spring cart overtook her, and pulled up and hailed her with the inquiry: "Well, Robiny, hoo's 'a wi ye the day?"

Robina stopped, and pretended to be absorbed in settling Edmund in his perambulator; for the moment the baby spied the trap he began to wriggle out of the strap that bound him in his seat, waving his arms, and shouting: "Me go 'ide in caht!"

"I would like a ride too," Montagu remarked in his usual deliberate fashion, and he smiled up at Sandie engagingly.

Sandie saw the little boy and smiled back broadly, but he was mostly looking at Robina.

"Is they wee things Piskeys tae?" Sandie asked, nodding his head towards the children.

"Na, na," Robina replied, shaking her head emphatically; "there's noan o' the wee leddy's flesh and blood Piskeys, I'se warrant. They'll gang tae the kirk wi' their auntie like ither Christian folk."

"What's a Piskey?" asked Montagu of the inquiring mind.

"I'm no very sure," the girl said slowly. "It's a new-fangled kin' o' kirk—is't no?" she added, looking up at Sandie.

Sandie grinned broadly, and drew himself up.

"I once went into one o' they kirks in Edinbory," he said, with the air of one who has passed through many strange adventures. "On a Sabbath evening," he continued hastily, as

Robina looked disapproving; "I gang no place else than oor ain kirk in the mornin'."

"And what like was it?" asked Robina, somewhat reassured by this assertion of orthodoxy.

"Dod', an' it's more than I can say. Ye was aye hoppin' up an' sittin' doon, wi a wee thing singin' here an' a wee bit prayin' there, an' a wee sma' readin'. Ma certy! there was sae monny preeleeminaries 'at I never thocht we'd reach the sairmon. An' when we did it was just as scampit as a' the rest. An' what wi' human hymns an' men i' their sarks jumpin' up here an' there, it was mair like play-actin' than a kirk. Nae mair Piskeys for me, I can tell ye!"

"But what *is* a Piskey?" Montagu again demanded.

"The auld gentleman wha' lives wi' us is a Piskey, so I've heard," Robina said in a low voice.

"I can well believe that," Sandie remarked meaningly, and tapped his forehead.

"Me go jive in caht!" Edmund exclaimed for about the thirtieth time, this time with an ominous warning of tears in his voice.

Sandie looked up the road and down the road; there was not a soul in sight.

"Wull I gie them a wee bit hurrl?" he asked Robina.

"The wee stoot yen couldna sit wi'oot some person to hold him," Robina said irresolutely, "an' I daurna' let them oot o' my sight. Mine's

is a poseetion o' great responsibeelity;" and once more she lifted the struggling Edmund back into his seat, from which he instantly wriggled, so that he was hung up under the arms by the strap.

"Pit the pram inside yon gate," suggested the ready Sandie, "and come tae. No harm 'll happen it, an' I'll gie ye a bit hurrl doon the rod."

"Me go jive in caht!" Edmund shouted joyfully, and held out his arms to Sandie. Edmund looked upon mankind in general as a means specially provided for his quick transit from place to place. "Uppee! uppee!" the baby cried impatiently.

"Let the bairn hae his hurrl," pleaded Sandie.

Montagu as yet found it somewhat difficult to follow the Scottish tongue, but he realized that Sandie was inviting them to go for a drive, and forthwith declared his own intention of accepting the invitation without Robina, if she declined to avail herself of it.

Finally the perambulator was put inside a field well out of sight. The two small boys were lifted into the cart, where Robina, with much display of white-stockinged substantial ankles, followed them. Away went the butcher's cart, with four "precious souls and all agog" seated abreast upon the wooden seat. Robina firmly clutched the "wee stoot yen," who chattered incessantly, giving the loudest expression to his satisfaction.

They had gone about half a mile along the Edinburgh road when a grey, bob-tailed sheep-dog was seen trotting along towards them, followed by a small pony-tub driven by an old lady.

"Megsty me!" Robina exclaimed in great consternation, "if yon's no the wee leddy hersel', and I thocht she was up at the hoose. Turn, man, turn, and get back afore she comes."

Sandie tried to turn, but Moggie, the butcher's mare, knew that she was on the homeward way, and had no wish to defer her arrival. Moggie was fresh and frisky, and very obstinate, and the more Sandie tried to turn her, the more did she back into the side of the road, finally starting to rear and plunge with an occasional rattle of hoofs on the splash-board.

Robina screamed with terror, and had it not been that the four on the seat were a pretty tight fit, the little boys would undoubtedly have been thrown out.

Miss Esperance was jogging slowly homewards in her little pony-tub, with only a village boy in attendance. She generally picked up some stray urchin as she drove through Burnhead, to hold the pony while she paid visits or did her shopping. As she drew nearer she perceived Moggie's antics and pulled up.

"That seems a very restive horse," she remarked anxiously. "I hope the young man is able to manage it, for I see he has children

in the cart. It would be terrible to have a collision. I think, Davie, you had better get out and hold Jock's head, and I," added the intrepid little lady, "will go and speak to that horse, and see if I can catch a hold of its head."

Davie looked at her admiringly. "It's the flesher's mare, Moggie," he murmured shyly, "an' she's awfu' flechty. Tak heed, mem, that she does na' fell ye."

Miss Esperance carefully descended from her little trap, and walked towards the mare, who was getting rather tired of fighting with Sandie, although she had no intention of giving in. Sandie had a firm hand, but he did not dare to beat his steed while Robina and the children were in the cart. He sawed at Moggie's mouth, and roared directions at her, and was so busily engaged in trying to get her round, that he did not see the little old lady till she was close upon him; then he nearly dropped his reins in his consternation, and was stricken absolutely dumb.

This was just what Miss Esperance wanted. All her life she had been used to horses, and she stepped up to the sweating, trembling, plunging mare, laid a small firm hand fearlessly upon her bridle, and spoke so soothingly and gently that Moggie ceased to plunge; and in a few minutes was standing quiet, though trembling, with the cart still blocking the road.

"Which way do you want her to go, and I'll turn her for you," she called to Sandie.

"*He* wants to go home, Aunt Esp'ance, but we don't. We'd much rather go on. D'you mind if we go on for a little more drive?"

And the amazed Miss Esperance looked up to perceive her great-nephews and Robina perched up in Sandie's cart.

Sandie was crimson and confused, Robina pale and tearful, the little boys bright-eyed and rosy with excitement.

"Robina!" Miss Esperance ejaculated in deepest displeasure. "What are you doing there with the children? Come down at once while the horse is quiet."

Hastily and ungracefully Robina scrambled out of the cart, and the little boys were handed down by Sandie, both deeply disappointed that their "hurrl" had come to this untimely end. Edmund was not one to conceal his feelings at any time, and he forthwith began to roar so lustily that further discussion was impossible, especially as Mause considered it incumbent upon her to bark loudly in joy at this unexpected reunion. Miss Esperance packed all three into her pony tub, dismissing Davie to walk home and bring the perambulator.

Moggie was the only one who scored, for she was driven off without delay in the direction she had all along wanted to go, and she went like the wind.

"What," asked Montagu of his aunt some days later, "is a Piskey?"

Miss Esperance drew her delicate eyebrows together. "Where have you heard the word?" she inquired in her turn.

"Robina said Mr. Wycherly's a Piskey, and I want to know what it is."

"Robina," said Miss Esperance, "is rather apt to talk about things she does not understand. 'Piskey,' my dear Montagu, is a vulgar way of saying 'Episcopalian,' and the English form of worship is called by that name in Scotland. I beg that you will not let me hear the word 'Piskey' again."

"I think it's rather a nice little word," Montagu retorted, "short and cheerful sounding. I suppose we're Presbeys?"

"Abbreviations," said Miss Esperance, "are nearly always foolish, and often in bad taste. I have never heard of a Presbey in my life."

"Piskey and Presbey were two pretty men," Montagu murmured dreamily, with a hazy recollection of some nursery rhyme, "though I think Piskey's far prettier than Presbey, just like Mr. Wycherly's prettier than Mr. Gloag."

"That will do, Montagu."

"D'you love Sandie, Aunt Esp'ance?" Montagu asked, with an abrupt change of subject.

"Certainly not," Miss Esperance answered hastily, "though I believe him to be a well-doing young man on the whole."

"I love him," said Montagu, "but we don't see him very often now. Robina's taken the

huff at him; he told me so. It's a pity, isn't it?"

"The less Robina sees of Sandie, the more likely is she to attend to her duties," Miss Esperance remarked austerely. Then suddenly, her whole face beaming, she added softly, as though to herself, "The lassie's full young for that sort of thing yet awhile."

If Robina had escaped lightly when Edmund was lost, Nemesis was by no means leaden-footed as regarded her latest escapade. She very nearly lost her situation, and only by the combined and reiterated entreaties of herself and her mother was Miss Esperance prevailed upon to give the girl another trial; therefore did Robina, with the unreason of her sex, lay the whole blame upon Sandie, and considered that he, and he alone, was responsible for the mistrustful attitude of the authorities with regard to her. She declined to speak to him or even to look at him for a whole fortnight. Morning and evening she passed him by, till at last he threatened that if she remained so obdurate he would forsake the Church of his fathers, and become a Piskey. Then, and only then, did Robina relent. "I couldna' hae that on my conscience," she reflected. But all the same, although she condescended to speak to Sandie "whiles," he found that he had to do most of his wooing all over again, and Robina would smile to herself from time to time as she

reflected that it's an ill wind blows nobody any good.

Robina was one of those who believed that what a man wants he will ask for over and over again, and that the harder a thing is to obtain the more it is valued; so she was very niggardly in the matter of her favours to Sandie, and her work prospered in consequence.

CHAPTER VI

THE AWAKENING OF MR. WYCHERLY

"Ay, you would gaze on a wind-shaken tree
By the hour, nor count time lost."

PARACELSUS.

MONTAGU'S education was taken in hand at once, and a very curious course of instruction it proved to be. Mr. Wycherly taught him to read, and to read Latin at the same time that he learned to read English. He also, which Montagu very much preferred, told him endless stories, historical and mythological, and in illustration thereof gave him for himself his own two precious oblong folios of Flaxman's "Compositions" on the very first birthday the little boy spent with Miss Esperance. These books were for Montagu the only nursery picture-books he knew, and Ulysses and Hector were as real and familiar to him as "Jack the Giant Killer" or "Bluebeard" to the ordinary child. He treasured them, and treated them always with the greatest care and tenderness. They were the one possession he declined to share with Edmund, who was careless, and tore things, to whom wide margins

and spacious pages made no appeal. He pored over the pictures for hours at a time, arriving at a very clear conception of the beauty of pure line.

When the children first came Mr. Wycherly might have been seen, during all such time as those energetic young people left to him, immersed in the study of a serviceable sheep-skin volume, the Wrexham edition of Roger Ascham's "Schoolmaster," making notes on the margins of the same, and marking such passages as seemed to him especially applicable to the matter under consideration.

Years after the owner's death Montagu found and read the wise old book, and realized how humbly and patiently Mr. Wycherly had set himself to follow out whatever he considered most valuable in the teaching of one whose mental attitude towards youth was certainly centuries in advance of his age. On the fly-leaf he had written in his small, delicate hand-writing: "In all my life, if I have done but little harm, I have done no good or useful thing. God help me that I may do this thing well;" and Montagu, with an almost rapturous remembrance of his teaching, could testify that the prayer had not been made in vain.

It was, no doubt, a good thing for Montagu that his tutor had such a common-sense standard of teaching always before him, for Mr. Wycherly's own inclination was apt to draw him away from the grind of grammar to discourse with

enthusiasm on the beauties and solemnities of the authors he so loved. Montagu was quick and receptive, with considerable power of concentration, and because he loved his teacher he speedily grew to love the subjects that he taught; so that he might truly have said with Lady Jane Grey: "My book hath been so much my pleasure, and bringeth daily to me more pleasure and more, that in respect of it all other pleasures, in very deed, be but trifles and troubles unto me."

Mr. Wycherly's sitting-room was much the largest in the little house. It was on the first floor and of a cheerful aspect, having two windows, facing east and south respectively. Here, for Montagu's own special use, were placed a little square oak table, with stout, stumpy legs, of a solid steadiness that even the most fidgety of little boys could not shake, and a three-legged stool that had once served Elsa as a milking-stool. These were set sideways in the window looking on to the kitchen-garden, as being a view less likely to distract the learner than that of the other, from which one beheld the front garden with the green railings, and the village street with all its possible excitements. The little table possessed a drawer with bright handles, and in this drawer Montagu kept his own exercise books, his pen with the pebble handle that Elsa had given him, his box of pencils, and every scrap of paper suitable for drawing on that he could collect—generally

half-sheets torn off letters by the careful hand of Miss Esperance. The table itself, in imitation of Mr. Wycherly's, was piled with books; but they were in orderly piles, and never set open one on the top of the other, as was the older scholar's habit.

There was another reason why Mr. Wycherly chose that window for Montagu: the morning sun shone straight through it, and the scholar, always something of a stranger in this chill north, craved all the sunshine he could get for the child. He liked to lean back in his own deep-seated revolving chair, set by the big knee-hole table in the centre of the room, and watch the little stooping figure in the patch of sunshine in the window laboriously tracing the Greek characters so neatly and carefully. A large-eyed, thin-faced boy was Montagu, somewhat sallow, with the round shoulders got during those early studies which he never lost in later life.

It was not only during lessons that Montagu sat at his little table: long hours did he spend there on wet days, while the wind howled round the little house like a hungry wolf, and the rain battered on the panes like shot—making drawings for himself of the battle in the "great harbour of Syracuse," which he had read about in Thomas Hobbes' translation; for Mr. Wycherly's shelves abounded in translations as well as in the "original texts"; and although, like most translators, he disagreed

with all accepted renderings, yet he encouraged Montagu's use of them, perhaps that he might the better, by-and-by, point out where he considered that they failed.

These drawings were afterwards bestowed upon Edmund, who would listen to Montagu's classic stories when they dealt with battles or ships, but who otherwise infinitely preferred Elsa's more homely legends regarding the doings of "Cockie Lockie and Henny Penny."

But there was more than the garden to be seen from Montagu's window: far away, sharp against the sky-line, lay the lion back of Arthur's Seat, and whenever Montagu raised his eyes from his work to look out, it was there that they rested. And inasmuch as at that time the Odyssey and its hero filled all his thoughts, the great gaunt hill became for him actually that Ithaca long sought and longed for by the many-counselled one, till every sight of it would thrill him with a sense of personal possession and delighted recognition.

Sometimes Montagu, looking back into the room, would find his old friend watching him, and the little boy would nod gaily without speaking, smiling the while the confident comrade smile of childhood, and thinking that, failing Achilles, he would like to look like Mr. Wycherly when he was old.

There is always something pleasantly surprising in the conjunction of white hair and very dark eyes and eyebrows; and in Mr.

Wycherly's case the expression of the dark eyes was extremely gentle, the features sharply cut and refined, the whole face of that clean-shaven, regular, aristocratic type, which the Rev. Peter Gloag—half in admiration, half in derision—described as so "intensely Oxfordish."

"He has got such a tidy face," Montagu said to his aunt one day.

"My dear, Mr. Wycherly is always considered a man of great personal attractions," she replied, rather shocked at his choice of an adjective.

"Yes, aunt dear, I know, but it's a tidy sort of handsomeness, not a bit like Noah and Jacob and those hairy prophets in the parlour."

The walls of his aunt's sitting-room were adorned by many engravings illustrative of the Scriptures, and Montagu, fresh from the study of his beloved Flaxman, would compare these bearded Hebrew prophets, so hampered by heavy draperies, with his airily attired and clean-limbed Greeks, always to the advantage of the latter. Yet he was forced to acknowledge to himself that his adored Mr. Wycherly resembled them equally little both in appearance and manner of life, for nothing could savour less of the adventurous than his existence. So Montagu "put the question by" as one to be answered in that wonderful grown-up time that children think will solve so many riddles. Mr. Wycherly was immensely happy in this new work, and approached his task with a certain tender reverence rare among teachers,

for he agreed with wise old Roger Ascham in thinking that "the pure clean wit of a sweet young babe is like the newest wax, most able to receive the best and fairest printing, and, like a new bright silver dish, never occupied, to receive and keep clean any good thing that is put in it."

One morning in early October Montagu was sitting as usual at his little table copying the Greek alphabet, while Mr. Wycherly sat watching him with pleased, dreamy eyes. As the little boy completed his task he raised his head with a sigh of satisfaction, and happened to look down into the garden.

"Do you think," he suddenly asked Mr. Wycherly, "I might go out and help Aunt Esperance dig the potatoes? The ground seems so heavy this morning."

Mr. Wycherly rose hastily, crossed over to Montagu's window, and looked out.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, and fled from the room.

Much astonished at this outburst from his usually serene tutor, Montagu tore downstairs after him.

What Mr. Wycherly had seen to cause him such consternation was what he might have seen any time during the last fifteen years—namely, the tiny, stooping figure of Miss Esperance digging the potatoes for the day's dinner. But if it ever happened that he did look out, he had never chanced to look down

into the homely garden below, or if he had, his eyes were holden, and he was wrapped in his dreams, so that he beheld only the things of the spirit, nor did he know how often the palms of those little hands, so ready to help others, were hard and blistered by their labours.

Since the days when he ran shouting along the towing-path at Oxford Mr. Wycherly had never run as he ran that morning to the potato patch at Remote. Montagu was hard put to it to catch him, but just managed it, and they arrived together before the astonished eyes of Miss Esperance, who saw them coming in such hot haste and rested on her spade in fear and trembling as to what could have happened.

When Mr. Wycherly did reach her he could not speak, so breathless was he; but he looked beseechingly at her and gently took the spade out of her hands.

"Why?" he gasped, "Why?" . . . His face worked strangely and he could say nothing more. Montagu stood watching him with solemn, puzzled eyes.

But Miss Esperance understood. "You have come to help me," she said gently; "that is very kind of you. Montagu! away and get your wee spade and dig too."

The little boy needed no second bidding, and flew to the tool-house. Mr. Wycherly hadn't the faintest notion how to dig potatoes. He had never held a spade in his hand before, and held this much as a nervous person unaccus-

tomed to firearms might hold a loaded gun. He looked helplessly at Miss Esperance, and still the lines were deep about his mouth and his eyes full of that new dumb pain.

"Watch Montagu!" she whispered, "he's a famous digger." Between them they dug quite a lot of potatoes, and Mr. Wycherly himself carried the heavy basket to Elsa at the back door. She took it from him without comment of any kind, but when he had gone round through the garden to get into the house by the front, she looked into the basket exclaiming: "Now what put sic a whigmalerie as this in his head?" And it seemed as if the potatoes must have thrown some light upon the question, for in another minute she said softly: "Yon's no a bad critter."

When Montagu went back to his lessons he found his tutor, with earthy hands clasped behind him, restlessly pacing up and down his room.

"I think you've done enough this morning," said Mr. Wycherly; "you'd better go out and play while it's so fine and nice."

"It's not twelve o'clock yet," Montagu objected, "and I generally do lessons till twelve."

"We shall have plenty of wet days by-and-by," Mr. Wycherly answered. "Go out now, and make the most of it while it is fine."

"But Robina and Edmund's gone, and Aunt Esperance is busy—won't you come?"

"Yes, I'll come." But yet Mr. Wycherly made no move to get ready.

"I've washed my hands," Montagu remarked virtuously.

Mr. Wycherly started, unclasped his hands, and held them out in front of him. "I fear," he said sadly, "that nothing will wash mine"—a remark which puzzled Montagu extremely, for in a few minutes Mr. Wycherly returned from his bedroom with perfectly clean hands.

It was a very silent walk at first, and what conversation there was Montagu made. At last he grew rather tired of this one-sided intercourse, and gave his companion's hand a tug as he demanded: "Are you asleep, that you don't never answer?"

Mr. Wycherly started. "No, my dear son," he said very gently, "I think that I am just beginning to be awake."

"Will you talk to me, then, like you generally do, and tell me things? Shall we go on about Jason? I do love stories where people do things."

Mr. Wycherly stood still in the middle of the road, and looked down into the eager little face uplifted to his. "You are right, Montagu," he said very gravely; "it is of little use to think things, if you don't do them." And then it seemed as though Mr. Wycherly gave himself a mental shake, for he devoted his whole attention to Montagu for the rest of their walk.

Mr. Wycherly's early dinner was served in his own room, but he always supped downstairs with Miss Esperance at seven o'clock. He was the most unpunctual of mortals, and when he first came, infuriated Elsa by sometimes forgetting to eat any lunch at all. But when he discovered that these lapses really distressed Miss Esperance, he schooled himself to keep as nearly as possible to the appointed hours. He was never late for supper, for that would have been discourteous to Miss Esperance, and he was incapable of discourtesy; but he did allow himself a certain amount of laxity with regard to lunch. As for breakfast—ever since the coming of the children he had been a model of punctuality, for they woke him up so uncommonly early.

When he entered his room after the walk with Montagu, he found his lunch all ready set on the round table in the middle of the room. This table was sacred to meals, and he was not permitted to pile it with books and papers. Hence, he was wont to regard its oaken emptiness between whiles with a wistful envy. It was so much good space wasted. His lunch was always very nicely laid, and to-day there was cold beef, thin, dainty slices adorned with parsley by Elsa's careful hand, and beside the beef stood a covered vegetable dish. Mr. Wycherly sat down at the table, poured out a glass of ale from the little Toby jug set at his right hand, and mechanically lifted the cover of

the dish. Potatoes were in that dish, and at the sight of them he rose hastily from the table. He went over to his big, knee-hole desk, and sitting down in front of it said aloud: "And all these years she has been digging potatoes for me."

Like a tired schoolboy he leaned forward, his arms upon his desk, laid his head down on them, and the room was very still.

When Elsa went in to take away the dishes, he had gone out; but his lunch was untouched. She shook her head ominously, and went and turned down his bed, though it was only early afternoon.

Mr. Wycherly walked and walked till he was quite worn out. He got back to the house about four o'clock, crawled up to his room, and sank quite exhausted into his big chair by the window. All the afternoon Elsa had been watching for him, and three minutes after his return she followed him upstairs, bearing a little tray, on which were set a cup of tea and a plate of most tempting-looking scones. She didn't even knock at his door, but went straight in, pushed the round table up to his elbow and laid the little tray upon it. She took up her stand at the window with her back to Mr. Wycherly, remarking fiercely: "From this place I'll not stir till you've taken that tea."

She did not even add the usual tardy "sir," and Mr. Wycherly was so startled that he never noticed the omission. He drank the tea,

and ate two scones, and all the time Elsa stood with her back to him looking out of the window.

Presently he touched her on the arm: "I am very much obliged to you, Elsa," he said. "I think I must have forgotten to eat as much lunch as usual. I was so extremely tired, but I feel much refreshed now."

Elsa grunted something quite inaudible, took the tray off the table, and, still with averted head, stumped out of the room.

But the fates had not done with Mr. Wycherly that day. As he and Miss Esperance sat down to supper, Montagu, who for some reason was rather later than usual in going to bed, came in to say good-night to them. He first kissed his aunt, who sat at one end of the table, then went to kiss Mr. Wycherly, who sat at the other. Having said good-night, of course he lingered, leant confidingly against his tutor, and in the universal fashion of children, who would fain put off the evil hour of bed, remarked detachedly: "You've got chops, Aunt Esperance has only got an egg. Don't you like chops, Aunt Esperance? I do, much better than eggs."

Mr. Wycherly dropped back in his chair looking painfully distressed. For a moment there was a dreadful pause, but the beautiful breeding of Miss Esperance stood her in good stead even then.

"Do you know," she exclaimed, as though a sudden thought had struck her, "I feel unusually hungry to-night. I think I will defy

my doctor for once, and take a chop after all, Mr. Wycherly."

And Miss Esperance handed up her little plate for the chop, which Mr. Wycherly joyfully placed upon it. But now came another difficulty—Miss Esperance, who had eaten a boiled egg at this hour nearly every night for some twenty years, had no fork.

"Montagu, my son," she said cheerfully, "run and ask Elsa for a fork for me."

No man ever existed who cared less about eating than Mr. Wycherly. Whatsoever was set before him, that he ate meekly and without comment — if he remembered. He always offered to help Miss Esperance from whatever dish was set before him at supper, and she as invariably refused it. It would have seemed to him an unwarrantable piece of interference even so indirectly to criticise her housekeeping as to suggest what she should eat. But to-day there had occurred something which had entirely shaken him out of his usual patient acquiescence in existing conditions, so that, when Montagu pointed out that his fare was so much better than that of Miss Esperance, he was seized by a new anguish of self-reproach. Had he, all these years, been living luxuriously?—that is how poor Mr. Wycherly put it to himself—while she—who with her frail little hands had pulled him forcibly back from the abyss into which he was so surely slipping—had she been living sparely? and he never even noticed

whether she had enough to eat. In his misery he was ready to accuse himself of having starved Miss Esperance that he might go full-fed himself.

It was rather a silent meal. Although Miss Esperance did her best to start topics of interest, his response, though never lacking in urbane attention, was somewhat half-hearted and depressed.

When he had gone upstairs to his own room, Miss Esperance waited, with the little bell which summoned Elsa still in her hand, till that good woman appeared, when she asked anxiously: "Elsa, do you know if anything has occurred to upset Mr. Wycherly? He is not looking at all well to-night."

Elsa shook her head. "I dinna ken, mem, what it 'll be, but he never touched his dinner, and when he came back this afternoon he looked like he'd been greetin' and greetin' sair."

Elsa paused; Miss Esperance made no answer, but stood still, looking at the lamp on the table, lost in thought.

"It's no the old thing," Elsa added suddenly, lowering her voice.

Miss Esperance put out her hand as if warding off a blow. "Of course not," she exclaimed. "I am surprised, Elsa, that you should so far forget yourself as to refer to . . . that time—so long ago, so entirely passed."

The little lady seemed in some subtle fashion to withdraw herself to some immense distance

from the homely serving-woman, who stood fingering her apron and saying nothing. She knew that she had offended her mistress, and when Miss Esperance was offended, she, usually the gentlest and friendliest of women, became quite unapproachable. She left the room with her usual noiseless tread, and for a good five minutes after she had gone Elsa stood where she was, still fingering her apron and wondering what she could do to make amends.

Mr. Wycherly sat at his knee-hole table far into the night. From the recesses of a drawer that had been locked for years he brought forth papers, long, legal-looking papers, and set himself, for the first time since he came to live with Miss Esperance, to look into his financial position. He made many notes, and his brow was furrowed by care and thought, for his brain lent itself with difficulty to the understanding of figures. Still he persevered, and gradually his expression became less pained and perplexed. For once, he did not leave his papers scattered all over the table. He arranged them neatly in bundles, and put them back again into the drawer and locked it.

When he had finished these unusually orderly arrangements, he pulled up the blind of Montagu's window and looked out towards Arthur's Seat. It was a moonlight night, and something of the large peace of that majestic

hill seemed to pass into his soul, for his gentle, scholarly face was no longer troubled, and he whispered, as if in prayer: "Thank God, I can at least do that for her. Thank God!"

The tender moonbeams touched Mr. Wycherly's hair, white since he was seven-and-twenty, to purest silver, and there seemed a benediction in that quiet hour for the little house that held so much of innocence and sorrow and repentance.

CHAPTER VII

ELSA DRIVES THE NAIL HOME

"And towards such a full or complete life, a life of various, yet select, sensation, the most direct and effective auxiliary must be, in a word, Insight."—MARIUS THE EPICUREAN.

WHEN Elsa came to clear away Mr. Wycherly's breakfast next morning, she shut the door carefully behind her and stumped—never had woman a heavier foot than Elsa—across to his writing-table, where she stood facing him in silence.

Mr. Wycherly was, as usual, bent over a book, and the book was Roger Ascham's "Schoolmaster." It was his habit ever since he had begun to teach Montagu to read therein for a few minutes every morning that he might start the lessons for the day in a frame of mind "fresh and serenely disposed."

When Elsa planted herself full in his view he had just reached the sentence describing the sixth virtue in a scholar—"He that is naturally bold to ask any question"—and was smiling to himself in the thought that both his

pupil and the small Edmund fulfilled this condition to the very letter, when he looked up and saw Elsa.

"Sir," said Elsa, "do ye not want an account of your money?"

"No, Elsa," Mr. Wycherly answered, smiling still, although a little startled by the interruption, "not in the least. I probably should not understand it if you gave it to me. Do you want any more? Because, if so, I have some for you." And Mr. Wycherly made as if to open one of the drawers of his table.

"Stop," Elsa exclaimed, "I've five pound yet, but I'm fear'd. I'd rather you had it back."

"But why?" Mr. Wycherly asked. "There must be many expenses, many extra expenses, since the children came."

"When the bairnies came," said Elsa, looking severely at Mr. Wycherly, "you gave me three ten-pound notes, and ever since I've been deceiving the mistress. Twenty-five pounds have I spent in groceries and odds and ends, and she so surprised-like that the bairns didna mak' so great a difference—and I just daurna gae on. I'm fear'd. If she was ever to ken—and she's that gleg in the uptak she'll ken somehow, an' it's me she'll blame and no you."

Elsa's voice broke. The favour of her mistress was very precious to her, and as yet she could not feel that Miss Esperance had quite forgiven her for her indiscretion of the night

before. Mr. Wycherly had obtained quite a large sum of money for the valuable books he sold when he and Miss Esperance went to fetch the children, and on their return he had given thirty pounds to Elsa, bidding her get any extras that might be necessary, without troubling her mistress. At that time Elsa had taken the money willingly enough, for she felt that it would be more usefully expended in her hands than if Mr. Wycherly kept it. "He'll just waste it on some haver of a bit book," she said to herself, and salved her conscience with this reflection; and it had, undoubtedly, tided the little household over a difficult time. But now, she felt, this cooking of the household books could not go on. It must come to an end with the money, and her mistress would wonder why, all at once, the weekly expenses had increased so mightily. Searching inquiries would be made, Elsa knew that she could not lie to Miss Esperance, and she came to the conclusion that as the money was his, it would be better that Mr. Wycherly should make the necessary explanation and bear the blame. She would be his accomplice in this innocent deception no longer.

Therefore did she take from her pocket a screw of paper, which she unfolded, displaying the five sovereigns wrapped in it, and laid them down on Mr. Wycherly's desk in a row.

"I can give an account for every penny of the twenty-five pound," said Elsa, turning away

from the table, "and you maun just tell her the truth. . . . Sir . . . The tradesmen's books 'll be gey and big this week," she added significantly.

Mr. Wycherly leant back in his chair and gazed helplessly at Elsa, who was now removing his breakfast-things with her customary clatter. She would not meet his eye, for an uneasy feeling that she had "gone back on him" to a certain extent disturbed her, and she was more than usually unapproachable in consequence.

She had finished clearing the table, and was about to depart with the tray, when Mr. Wycherly spoke.

"Elsa," he said, "you had better take this money, and use it as you did the other. You are quite right that Miss Esperance must know. It is an impertinence on our part to do anything without her knowledge; but I hope—I sincerely hope — that in the future Miss Esperance will permit me to act as guardian to her great-nephews in more than name—that she will give me the *right* to take my share . . . in whatever may be necessary. But be reassured as to this, Elsa, I will not allow you to be blamed for what, after all, was wholly my fault—a grievous fault in taste, I confess; but it was done hastily, and, to be quite candid, I had wholly forgotten the circumstance until you very properly reminded me of it."

Mr. Wycherly spoke earnestly, and while he

was talking Elsa had laid down the tray again on the centre table. She made no answer to this unusually long speech from him, but stood with her hard old face set like a flint, wholly expressionless, till she remarked suddenly and irrelevantly: "Could you tak' your breakfast at eight o'clock instead o' nine, sir?"

"Certainly," Mr. Wycherly replied, rather astonished at this abrupt change of subject, "if you will be kind enough to call me rather earlier. Those little people wake me in excellent time."

"Would you let the mistress come here to her breakfast wi' you?"

Mr. Wycherly rose to his feet.

"Do you think Miss Esperance would so far honour me, Elsa?"

Elsa and Mr. Wycherly stood looking at one another across the room. Suddenly she bent her eyes upon the carpet, and spoke in a low, monotonous voice.

"Sir," she said, "it's like this. The mistress never gets a proper breakfast for those wee bairns——"

"I can well believe that," Mr. Wycherly interrupted.

"Now, if you, sir" (it was surprising how fluently the "sir" came to Elsa just then), "would just say that you'd like your breakfast a wee thing sooner in the morning, and would ask the mistress would she no have hers wi' you for the company, then me an' Robina 'll

see that the wee boys has theirs. Don't you think, sir, you'd eat more yersel' if ye was no read, readin' a' the time? If ye'd just tell the mistress that? It's dull-like, isn't it, to eat yer lane?"

Elsa picked up her tray and hastened from the room, feeling that, do as she would, she and Mr. Wycherly were doomed to be fellow-conspirators.

The sun came out and shone on the five sovereigns lying on the writing-table, and Montagu at that moment coming in to his lessons spied them.

"What a lot of money!" he exclaimed. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I hope," said Mr. Wycherly, quite gaily, "that I am going to buy large pieces of happiness with it."

"Can you buy happiness?" Montagu asked wonderingly, ever desirous to search out any doubt.

"No," Mr. Wycherly said decidedly, "not the best kinds; but it sometimes happens that one can buy useful things that help—to a certain degree—in obtaining happiness; and it is those useful things that I hope to buy."

"Useful things," Montagu repeated, in a disappointed tone; "like pinafores? Those sort of things wouldn't make *me* happy."

Montagu loathed the blue pinafores enforced by Miss Esperance, and considered it a degradation to wear one.

"I'm not sure that I shall buy pinafores," said Mr. Wycherly; "they are not the only useful things in the world."

"Useful things are always dull," Montagu persisted.

"On the contrary," Mr. Wycherly replied, "useful things are sometimes full of the most exquisite romance."

That day early after lunch he called upon Lady Alicia Carruthers. She was at home and alone, and he stayed with her nearly all the afternoon. Lady Alicia would not let him go till he had had a cup of tea, and this marked an epoch in the life of Mr. Wycherly at Remote, for it was the first time he had broken bread in a neighbour's house.

Shortly after this he astonished his relatives by suddenly demanding entire control of his property. He sent for the family lawyer, a certain Mr. Woodhouse, and went into his affairs with such a thoroughness and an amount of legal acumen as quite amazed that worthy man.

Mr. Wycherly's brothers were by no means pleased. For many years—ever since he had, much against their will, and in direct opposition to the advice and warnings showered upon him, resigned his fellowship, and withdrawn himself finally from the scene of all his former interests—he had been well content to spend about half his little income, while the remainder accumulated under their careful stewardship,

presumably for their benefit and that of their children. He had asked no questions, and appeared, as indeed he was, quite contented with the arrangement. So entirely had he accepted existing conditions, that when he wanted money in a hurry, in order to see that Miss Esperance and the children should make the journey in decent comfort, he had sold his most precious books instead of telegraphing to his solicitor.

But with the advent of Archie's children Mr. Wycherly was completely shaken out of his groove. His humble desire to hide his shame from the eyes of men (for to him, even in times when occasional excess was regarded by the majority less severely than it is now, it meant disgrace and dishonour) gave way to the more ardent desire that these boys might take their place in the world he had left; see and be seen, and, if possible, seize all the opportunities that he himself had thrown away.

Mr. Woodhouse had travelled all the way from Shrewsbury to Edinburgh to confer with Mr. Wycherly, and he stayed with Lady Alicia, for the public-house at Burnhead was of a very humble order, having no bedroom to offer to the wayfaring stranger. Like many other people, he had fallen under the charm of Miss Esperance, and he not only acquiesced, but positively encouraged Mr. Wycherly in all his plans for the disposal of his property. It is quite possible that he was not sorry to see his other clients of

that name disappointed. "They've kept him short all these years, when they had no earthly right to, just because he and the old lady are as unworldly as a pair of babies, and now, after all their scheming and saving, the whole of that money will go to benefit *her* relations," said Mr. Woodhouse to Lady Alicia, with a chuckle. "It's poetic justice, that's what I call it."

Mr. Woodhouse was standing on the hearth-rug warming his coat-tails. He had returned for the night from Remote, and was quite prepared to enjoy a comfortable chat with Lady Alicia and her pretty daughter, Margaret, who were sitting by the fire knitting diligently.

"Do you happen to know," asked Lady Alicia, who had never dared ask the question of Miss Esperance, "what caused the—er—mental breakdown that made Mr. Wycherly leave Oxford?"

The keen eyes under the bushy eyebrows twinkled with amusement as Mr. Woodhouse surveyed his hostess, who was, he very well knew, devoured by curiosity.

"I've never really heard the rights of it," he said cautiously; "but from what I *have* heard I should gather that it was as usual, saving your presence, my dear young lady, a woman who was at the bottom of the mischief."

"Oh!" exclaimed pretty Margaret, "how very sad! Did she die?"

"She was," said Mr. Woodhouse, gazing into

the gracious, pitiful young face uplifted to his, "a hard, scheming woman, beautiful, of course, not over-young—in fact, I think she was older than he was. He then was considered the handsomest man in Oxford, very distinguished, you know, with his white hair and young face; all the Wycherlys go grey very early. At that time there seemed no honour in the University to which he might not aspire. . . . He was popular in society. . . ."

"He has the most beautiful manners," Lady Alicia remarked, laying down her knitting and preparing to enjoy herself.

"He had then. In fact, in Oxford he was looked upon as a very brilliant and rising young man; and the fact that he had some private means made it possible for him to go into Society with a big 'S' rather more than is usual in such cases."

"I always felt," said Lady Alicia bridling, "that he had at some time or another belonged to the great world. But what of the lady?"

"She came down for Commemoration Week, stayed, I think, with the Dean of Christ Church, and made a dead set at Wycherly. He went down before her like a ninepin, and they were engaged, and there was 'a marriage arranged to take place' before the week was out."

"Why didn't it take place?" asked pretty Margaret eagerly.

"Because, my dear young lady, the lady in question happened to fascinate a richer man

just a week before the wedding-day, and poor Wycherly discovered the whole affair in some fashion that was a very great shock to him. The only thing he was ever heard to say about it was that it hurt him rather to hear of her marriage to the other man while he was still under the impression that she was engaged to him."

"She wasn't worth grieving over," Lady Alicia cried indignantly.

"Poor Mr. Wycherly!" pretty Margaret said softly, "and he is so kind and gentle always."

"I hope her marriage turned out badly," said Lady Alicia vindictively.

"Your ladyship's pious hope was amply fulfilled," Mr. Woodhouse replied.

"Won't you tell us who she was?" Lady Alicia demanded in honeyed tones.

"Alas, dear Lady Alicia, that I must not do. She is dead . . . *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, you know . . . may she rest in peace!"

Lady Alicia folded up her knitting. "In that case," she said somewhat abruptly, "we must not keep you out of your bed any longer; you have had a tiring day."

* * * * *

"Is he quite capable of managing his own affairs?" Mr. Wycherly's brothers eagerly asked Mr. Woodhouse on his return some three days later.

"Perfectly capable," answered that gentleman decidedly. "Indeed, he shows quite remark-

able business capacity considering how long it is since he has undertaken anything of the kind. It's a thousand pities he resigned his fellowship. I would not advise you to attempt any sort of interference with him—for, however reluctant I might be to give evidence as to the impropriety of such a course, I should be obliged in common honesty to do so. It was certainly Quixotic to resign his fellowship when he did, but it could not be brought up as a proof of mental incapacity at this time of day."

Mr. Wycherly's brothers did not fail to remind him at this juncture that, had he listened to them, he would still be enjoying the income of his fellowship. "No one," they had reiterated, "could take it from him while he lived. Once a fellow, always a fellow—a fellowship was a freehold, and what did it matter to the authorities in Oxford what he did north of the Tweed?"

But Mr. Wycherly had loved his college too dearly to bring shame upon her, and if he could not serve, neither would he accept wage. And now that he had every reason to wish that his income was larger, it was the one step in all the inglorious past that he did not regret.

Through the family solicitor he demanded an account of all moneys belonging to himself, explaining with the utmost clearness that he intended to educate both Montagu and Edmund "as befitted their position in life," that he wished to adopt both of them, and that, with their aunt's consent, the elder of the two was

to take his name, and inherit whatever he could leave him.

"It won't be much," he said to Mr. Woodhouse, when he was discussing ways and means with him, "for I intend Montagu to go to Winchester and New College; and of course Edmund, should he go into the navy, will need a considerable allowance for years to come. But whatever there is, that they are to have, and above all I beg you to make it perfectly clear to Miss Esperance that she need be under no apprehension as to their future."

For the sake of "Archie's boys" Mr. Wycherly even bethought him of old friends from whose kindly, questioning eyes he would fain have hidden. Insensibly, too, he accustomed himself to dwell fondly upon the past—that pleasant past once so full of success, of dignity, and of the intellectual honours so dear to him—that happy time preceding those dark years of weakness and shame and mental degradation.

Thus he found himself telling Montagu all about William of Wykeham of pious memory: of the "Founder's Crozier" and the "Great West Window," and of the Warden's library at New College, where they keep the Founder's Jewel. Day by day Montagu would revert to these entrancing topics till Oxford rivalled even Troy in his affections, and the knowledge that he himself was destined one day to go and live in this wonderful place gave an even greater zest to his studies than before.

Moreover, pictures of this same Oxford were found in boxes stored away, and were brought forth and at Montagu's request hung up, till, what with books and what with engravings, there was hardly an inch of drab-coloured wall to be seen.

As to the matter of breakfast, Elsa was so piteous in her account of how that meal was by him neglected, and he proclaimed his loneliness in such moving terms, that Miss Esperance came to the conclusion that he was really far more in need of her supervision than the little boys, and it ended in their breakfasting together in his room at eight o'clock; and Mr. Wycherly, on the morning that initiated this new arrangement, was as nervous and excited as an undergraduate who expects "ladies to lunch" in his rooms for the first time.

CHAPTER VIII

EDMUND RECHRISTENS MR. WYCHERLY

"'Time was,' the golden head
Irrevocably said;
'But time which none can bind,
While flowing fast away, leaves love behind.'"
R. L. STEVENSON.

"IT is just a year to-day since the children came," said Miss Esperance, smiling across the table at Mr. Wycherly as they sat together at breakfast in his room.

"In some ways," he replied thoughtfully, "it seems as though they must always have been here; it is impossible to conceive of life without them—now. In others, the time has gone so fast that it might be but yesterday they came."

"When I was younger," Miss Esperance went on in her gentle, old voice, "I used to look forward with such dread to a lonely old age. I used to think: 'What would life be if my father and my brothers died?' and one by one they were all taken from me, and Archie was the last of our family—and he is dead. But the Lord has been very merciful. First he sent you to me, and then the children to us both.

Goodness and mercy all my life have surely followed me."

Miss Esperance paused, still smiling in the happy confidence of the peace that wrapped her round.

If Mr. Wycherly did not answer it was not because he did not agree with Miss Esperance as to the wonderful workings of Providence. But speech on such subjects was to him almost impossible; and she, looking wistfully into his face, partly realized this. But she was not quite satisfied. Religion was, for her, so entirely the mainspring of her every impulse, her every action, that it was impossible for her in any way to separate it from the most ordinary daily doings; and to her it was as easy and as natural to confess her faith and her deepest feelings with regard to these matters as it was impossible for him. This inability on his part formed, to a certain extent, a barrier between them—a barrier which can only be broken down by mutual consent; and while he would have done, as in very truth he did, anything in the world to give her pleasure and peace of mind, this thing which she would have valued most he could not give her. He *could* not talk about his religious views.

In the silence that followed it is possible that there recurred to the minds of both an incident not wholly without bearing on their future intercourse. One Sabbath evening, shortly after he had gone to live with Miss Esperance at

Remote, she had asked him to "engage in prayer" at family worship, the "family" consisting of herself and Elsa.

Mr. Wycherly complied readily enough, for he knew plenty of prayers: but when he prayed, he prayed for "the bishops and curates and all congregations committed to their charge"; he prayed for the "good estate of the Catholic Church here upon earth"; and, worst of all—it being the collect for the day—he prayed that "as Thy Holy Angels always do Thee service in heaven, so by Thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth." Never was such a scandal in a strictly Presbyterian household. Elsa proclaimed throughout the village that Miss Esperance had been induced to harbour an undoubted Puseyite, and it would not have surprised *her* in the least if he had prayed for the Pope himself.

And Miss Esperance, knowing the length and strength of Elsa's tongue, felt herself constrained to explain (she did it with considerable humour) to the Rev. Peter Gloag what had really happened. Whereupon, the minister dismissed Mr. Wycherly and all his works as being "fettered by formulæ"; and to the great relief of this prisoner in the chains of ecclesiasticism he was never again asked to conduct family worship. He innocently wondered why, for he imagined, with some complacency, that he had acquitted himself gracefully in what had been rather a trying ordeal.

The tender smile of Miss Esperance, as she reflected upon her many mercies, had changed to a smile of no less tender amusement as she recalled those bygone days, and Mr. Wycherly, ever quick to notice any change in the dear old face he loved so well, felt that he might now venture upon more familiar ground.

"You look amused," he remarked; "would it be a safe conjecture to say that you are probably thinking of Edmund?"

"That reminds me," Miss Esperance exclaimed, without committing herself, "I do wish that we could induce that dear little boy not to call you 'man.' It is so disrespectful."

It had never struck Mr. Wycherly in that light. In fact, he had found considerable secret comfort in the fact that Edmund, at all events, had from the very first considered him deserving of that epithet. Mr. Wycherly was sensitive, and he knew perfectly well in what sort of estimation most of the inhabitants of Burnhead held him.

"Do you think it matters," he asked mildly, "what such a baby calls me?"

"Not to you, certainly," Miss Esperance replied promptly; "but I do think it matters for him. He is three now, and it's time he knew better."

"Surely three is not a very great age?" Mr. Wycherly pleaded.

"It is old enough for Edmund to want his own way, and generally to take it," Miss

Esperance rejoined as she rose from the table, "and it is old enough for him to learn that he must be dutiful and obedient."

As Mr. Wycherly held the door open for her to go out he remarked deferentially: "But don't you think, dear Miss Esperance, that either 'mister' or 'sir' is a somewhat formal mode of address to exact from such a baby?"

"I called my honoured father 'sir' from the time I could speak at all, and when I was young it would never for one moment have been permitted to us to address any grown-up person otherwise than with respect." Miss Esperance continued, as she paused in the doorway: "I will see what I can do about it this very day. I feel sure that if we reason with that dear child we can induce him to find some more suitable way of addressing you."

When Miss Esperance had gone, and Mr. Wycherly had shut his door, he shook his head and laughed. Two or three times lately he had tried a fall with Edmund, and that lusty infant invariably came off an easy victor.

It was the daily custom for both the little boys to visit Mr. Wycherly for a few minutes after breakfast, when biscuits were doled out, and there was much cheery good-fellowship. Mr. Wycherly himself made periodical visits to Edinburgh to purchase these biscuits, which were adorned with pink and white sugar, and were of a delectable flavour. Once the biscuits

were consumed—they had three each—Montagu settled down to his lessons, and Edmund, ever unwillingly, departed with Robina.

Through the open window that morning there floated an imperative baby voice. "See man," it insisted; "me go and see man."

Mr. Wycherly looked out and Edmund looked up. He stretched out his fat arms, balancing himself first on one foot and then on the other, as though poised for flight, while in the thrush-like tones that were always irresistible to Mr. Wycherly he gave his usual cry of "Uppee! Uppee! *deah* man."

When Edmund called him "deah man" there was nothing on earth that Mr. Wycherly could withhold. "Bring Edmund up, Montagu," he said, leaning out of the window; "we'll have a holiday to-day: it's a kind of birthday. Just a year since you came."

But the gentle voice of Miss Esperance interposed: "Edmund must say 'Please, Mr. Wycherly,' or 'Please, sir,' then he can go up."

"See man; me go and see man," Edmund persisted, absolutely ignoring his aunt's admonition and jumping up and down as though he could reach Mr. Wycherly that way.

"No, Edmund," Miss Esperance said firmly, "you *must* say 'Please, Mr. Wycherly.'"

Edmund looked at his aunt, and his round chubby face expressed the utmost defiance. "I *sall* say 'Man,' and I will go to man," he announced loudly and distinctly; "he's my man,

and I 'ove him—I don't 'ove *you*," he added emphatically.

"Edmund, my son, come here." There was no resisting the resolution in that very gentle voice. Miss Esperance seated herself on the garden-seat under Mr. Wycherly's window, and Edmund came at her bidding to stand in front of her, square and sturdy and rebellious.

Mr. Wycherly had withdrawn from the window when Miss Esperance first began her expostulation with Edmund. Now, it struck him as rather shabby to leave her to wrestle with that young sinner alone over a matter which certainly referred to himself; so he hastened downstairs and joined her in the garden.

On his appearance Edmund began his dance again, and his petition of "Uppee! Uppee!"

Mr. Wycherly went and sat on the seat beside Miss Esperance, trying hard to look stern and judicial, and failing signally, while the chubby culprit made ineffectual attempts to climb upon his knee.

"Edmund must say 'Please, Mr. Wycherly,' or 'Please, sir,'" Miss Esperance repeated.

"Peese, Mittah Chahley," echoed Edmund in tones that would have melted a heart of stone.

Now if "man" was a disrespectful and familiar mode of address, "Chahley" seemed a singularly inappropriate pseudonym for Mr. Wycherly.

Even Montagu giggled.

The matutinal service of biscuits was long overdue; Edmund grew impatient, and the corners of his rosy mouth drooped. "I've said 'Chahley,'" he announced reproachfully, "and you don't take me."

Mr. Wycherly looked beseechingly at Miss Esperance. "I think he has done his best," he said in deprecating tones; "it is a difficult name for a baby.

"Chahley! Chahley!" chirped Edmund, beginning to dance again, "Uppee! Uppee!" Then turning to his aunt: "I've said 'im."

"You haven't said it right . . . but perhaps——" Miss Esperance wavered.

Edmund marched up to his aunt, placed both his dimpled elbows on her knees, and gazing earnestly into her face with bunches of unshed tears still hanging on his lashes, remarked vindictively: "I wis a gate bid ball would come and bounce at you."

Miss Esperance burst out laughing and stooped to kiss the red, indignant baby-face. "All the same, my dear son, you must learn to do what you are told."

"Me go wiv . . . Chahlee," Edmund announced triumphantly, as Mr. Wycherly lifted him up.

"Am I to call you Charlie too?" asked Montagu, who was rather jealous where his tutor's favour was concerned.

"Pray don't!" exclaimed that gentleman hastily.

"Chahlee, Chahlee," crowed Edmund from the safe vantage-ground of Mr. Wycherly's arms, as he was carried upstairs. "Deah man, Chahlee."

Miss Esperance sat on where she was. Her interference had certainly not improved matters, and she was really perturbed. That she should in any way, however inadvertently and innocently, have rendered Mr. Wycherly in the smallest degree ridiculous was most distressing to her.

Had the baby done his best? or was it but one more instance of his supreme subtlety in the avoidance of doing what he was told?

Miss Esperance adored Edmund. He was a Bethune from the top curl of his fair hair to his small, straight pink toes. Handsome, ruddy, with very blue eyes—eyes that changed in colour with his every emotion, even as the sea so many of his forbears had served changes with the passing hours; he was the image of Archie Bethune, his father. He was like her brother whose name he bore, and still stronger was his likeness to the admiral, her father, that generous and choleric sailor whose memory she so revered.

Yet no one knew better than Miss Esperance the faults of the Bethune temperament. Had she not suffered from them herself in the past? And she was painfully anxious to keep in check the wilful impulsiveness so strongly marked in her great-nephew. That taking of their own

way, no matter at what cost in tribulation to themselves or suffering to others—how many Bethunes had it ruined in the past! And yet, if she rebuked him now, it might confuse the baby: and, above all, Miss Esperance desired to be just in her dealings with these small creatures committed to her charge.

As she sat in the sunshine with the children's voices borne to her on the soft winds of early summer she prayed for guidance.

Suddenly the children's voices ceased, for Mr. Wycherly was reading aloud. It was his habit to read to them odd scraps of anything that had happened to please himself, while they munched their biscuits. Sometimes they, or at all events Montagu, understood; as often they did not; but both found some sort of pleasure in the fine English gracefully read. Miss Esperance listened, and, as if in answer to her prayer, she heard, in Mr. Wycherly's gentle, cultivated tones, these words: "Love is fitter than fear, gentleness better than beating, to bring up a child rightly in learning."

So for a while Baby Edmund was allowed to call Mr. Wycherly very much what he pleased. He occasionally conceded something to convention by addressing him as "Mittah man" or "Mittah Chahley"; but, as a rule, he took his own way; finally adopting for Mr. Wycherly Elsa's usual style of address towards himself—namely, "dearie."

It had never occurred to Mr. Wycherly as

possible that anyone should address him as "dearie," and this particular term of endearment did sound somewhat of an anachronism.

But he liked it—he liked it amazingly; and seeing this, Miss Esperance interfered no more.

In the end, however, it was Montagu who found a pet name for Mr. Wycherly. "What are you to me?" the little boy asked one day. "Are you an uncle?"

"No," said Mr. Wycherly, "I am your guardian."

"What's a guardian?"

"Someone who takes care of a child who has lost his parents."

"May I call you 'guardian'?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"May Edmund?"

"Assuredly."

"Then we will—it's more friendlier than 'mister' don't you think?"

And it ended in Guardian being abbreviated into "Guardie," so that Mr. Wycherly was, after all, the only member of the household who was permitted a diminutive.

CHAPTER IX

CUPID ABROAD

"Cupid abroad was lated in the night,
His wings were wet with ranging in the rain;
Harbour he sought, to me he took his flight,
To dry his plumes: I heard the boy complain;
I ope'd the door, and granted his desire.
I rose myself, and made the wag a fire."

ROBERT GREENE.

EVERYONE in the neighbourhood of Burnhead called Lady Alicia's youngest daughter "bonnie Margaret," so full of charm and gaiety and gentleness was she. Not all the year was Lady Alicia at the "big hoose": since the death of her husband—worthy David Carruthers, late Advocate—she always wintered in Edinburgh; but with May, bonnie Margaret came back to Burnhead; unless, indeed, as had happened lately, she spent that month in London with one of her married sisters. But, at all events, some part of the summer saw her back at Burnhead, and the sun seemed to shine the brighter for her coming.

Like everyone else, she was very fond of Miss Esperance, and she often came to Remote to play with the little boys who whole-heartedly

approved of her. Mr. Wycherly, too, was fond of bonnie Margaret, and somehow, recently, she had seemed to come across him very often during his walks with Montagu. She would join them, and sometimes spend a whole long afternoon in the little copse, sitting beside Mr. Wycherly at the foot of his favourite tree, while Montagu played by the brook.

Very shyly, and with many most becoming blushes, Margaret confided to Mr. Wycherly that she had met a nephew of his during her visits to her sister. Mr. Wycherly was not in the least interested in his nephew, but he was interested in anything bonnie Margaret chose to talk about, and the nephew acquired a fictitious importance for this reason.

This nephew was, Margaret carefully explained, an exceedingly clever young man, who had taken a good degree; but he didn't want to take Orders, and he hated schoolmastering—he had tried it—and now he had gone into a friend's business as a wine-merchant, and his people were very much annoyed. What was Mr. Wycherly's opinion on the subject? And didn't he think it was very noble of this young man to earn his bread in this particular fashion? It had taken many meetings and much elaborate and roundabout explanation upon Margaret's part before this final statement of the situation was reached; and Mr. Wycherly, having in the meantime heard complaints that bonnie Margaret was

very ill to please in the matter of a husband, began to put two and two together. Many swains had sighed at Margaret's shrine, and she had received what her mother called "several quite good offers," but she would have nothing to say to any of them. She was in character fully as decided as Lady Alicia herself. But she was demure and gentle in manner, and instead of fighting for her own way, as is the custom of the strenuous, simply took it quietly, and without vehement declaration of any kind.

When appealed to as to his opinion of the nobility of his nephew's conduct in thus plunging into trade, Margaret and Mr. Wycherly were sitting on a low wall, watching Edmund and Mause and Montagu disport themselves in the hayfield it bordered.

The summer sun was warm, and Margaret wore a floppy leghorn hat, which threw a most becoming shade over her serious grey eyes—eyes with long black lashes, in somewhat startling contrast to her very fair hair. Mr. Wycherly particularly admired her Greek profile, her short upper-lip, the lovely oval of her cheek and chin. Still more did he appreciate her sweet consideration and gentleness; and for the first time since he came to live in Scotland he found himself wishing that he knew something of this nephew who so plainly occupied a prominent position in the thoughts of this kind and beautiful girl.

"Of course," Mr. Wycherly remarked guardedly, "he is perfectly right to earn his own living in the way that seems best to him, though whether it was absolutely necessary to run counter to the prejudices of his relatives in order to do so is not quite clear."

"But you would not, would you, look down on anyone just because he happened to be in trade? If he is a cultured gentleman already, his being in trade can't make him less of a cultured gentleman, can it?"

"Of course not," Mr. Wycherly agreed, "but I think I can understand, perhaps, some slight reason for annoyance on the part of his people. You see, had he announced earlier this extreme desire to go into business, it is hardly likely that they would have given him an expensive education at the University. He was, you tell me, five years at Oxford?"

"He didn't waste his time there," Margaret answered eagerly; "he took all sorts of honours: but he loathes teaching. . . ." Margaret stopped, for Mr. Wycherly was looking at her with a curiously amused expression, which seemed to say, "How is it that you are so remarkably conversant with the likes and dislikes of this young man?"

She leant over the wall to gather some of the big horse-gowans that grew in the field, so that her face was hidden from Mr. Wycherly. She fastened a little bunch of them into her waist-band; then she said in the detached tone

of one who seeks for information merely from curiosity:

"Don't you think that, at some time or other, one has to settle what to do with one's life, regardless of whether it is pleasing to other people or not—I mean in very big and important things?"

Mr. Wycherly, who thought she was still referring to his nephew, cordially agreed that, for most of us, such a course at some time or other is a necessity.

As it happened, however, bonnie Margaret was not talking of his nephew, but of herself. Mr. Wycherly remembered this in the following October, when, Lady Alicia having removed her household to Edinburgh, a startling rumour shook the village to its very foundations—a rumour to the effect that bonnie Margaret had "taken the train" and was married next morning to somebody in the South of England.

Miss Esperance was much shocked and perturbed, the more so that she felt it devolved upon her, and her alone, to break this agitating intelligence to Mr. Wycherly. For was not a relative of his own the chief culprit? Miss Esperance could never understand Mr. Wycherly's indifference towards everything that concerned his relations.

She had heard the news just before supper, but she waited until that meal was finished lest her communication might spoil his appetite.

It was their pleasant custom to sit and chat

for a while every evening while Mr. Wycherly drank his single glass of port, and cracked some nuts which he generally bestowed next morning upon the little boys.

He held up his glass of wine to the light, and even in the midst of her uneasiness Miss Esperance noted with pleasure how steady was the long, slender hand that held the glass.

"I have heard," Miss Esperance began, with a deep sigh, "some most distressing news to-day about certain good friends of ours."

"Is Mrs. Gloag worse?" Mr. Wycherly asked anxiously, for the minister's wife was very delicate, and was often quite seriously ill.

"No, no, nobody is ill; but I fear that our good friend Lady Alicia is in very great trouble. Margaret——"

"Has married against her mother's wish?" Mr. Wycherly interrupted quickly.

"That's just what she has done—but how did you guess?"

"And she has married," Mr. Wycherly continued, "a nephew of mine. . . . If I mistake not, Margaret was twenty-one only the other day."

"It seems," Miss Esperance went on, much astonished at the calmness with which Mr. Wycherly received these grievous tidings, "that this young man proposed to Margaret some time ago; but that Lady Alicia wouldn't hear of any engagement. He asked for Mar-

garet again this summer, and was again refused; though Margaret told her mother that she intended to marry him, and considered herself engaged to him in spite of everything. . . . And, as you say, directly she came of age she has done it."

Mr. Wycherly had laid down his glass of port untasted when Miss Esperance first began to speak. Now he lifted the decanter and poured out another, offering it to Miss Esperance. "My dear friend," he exclaimed eagerly, "they are married. Nothing can alter that. Let us drink pretty Margaret's health, and wish her all prosperity and happiness, and may the man she has chosen try to be worthy of her!"

Miss Esperance demurred; but Mr. Wycherly continued to lean across the table with the glass of wine held out towards her, and he looked so pleading and she so loved to gratify him, that at last, though a little under protest, she consented to drink this toast, and took one sip from the proffered glass of port.

"I wish I could feel that it will turn out well," she said wistfully.

"She must love him right well," Mr. Wycherly said thoughtfully, "and she is not a foolish girl. She has judgment and discretion."

"Where love is concerned," said Miss Esperance, "judgment and discretion generally go to the wall."

And Mr. Wycherly could find no arguments in disproof of this statement.

Lady Alicia made a special journey to Remote for the express purpose of reproaching Mr. Wycherly with the conduct of a nephew he had never seen.

Miss Esperance was out; Mr. Wycherly, as usual, reading in his room. There Lady Alicia sought him, and plunged at once into a history of the "entanglement," as she called it, concluding with these words: "I told her never to mention that young man to me again, and she never did, so of course I concluded that, like a sensible girl, she had put the whole thing out of her head; but the hussy has *married* him without ever a wedding present or a single new gown, and what can I do? A girl, too, who might have married anyone, by far the prettiest of the four; and look how well the rest have married!"

"She must love him very much," Mr. Wycherly said dreamily. "Pretty Margaret, so gentle always and so quiet! What strength, what tenacity of purpose under that docile feminine exterior! Dear Lady Alicia, she is more like you than any of your other daughters."

"Like *me!*" Lady Alicia almost shouted. "Do you mean to say *I* could have run away with any bottle-nosed vintner that ever tasted port—*I*, forsooth!"

"But you told me yourself that he is a gentleman, young and good-looking," Mr. Wycherly

expostulated. "If I remember rightly, too, something of a scholar—and Margaret loves him. She has proved that beyond all question. God grant that he is worthy of her love! You can't unmarry them, my dear old friend, and though you will be angry with me, I must tell you that I think it is well you can't. You must forgive them both."

"Never," said Lady Alicia with the greatest determination. "She has chosen her vintner; let her stick to him."

"She will do that in any case," said Mr. Wycherly; "but she will love her mother none the less, and her mother will, presently, love her all the more."

"She will do nothing of the kind," Lady Alicia said with considerable asperity. "You don't seem to realize what a disgraceful thing your nephew has done in abducting my daughter in this fashion."

"I thought you said she went to him," Mr. Wycherly suggested apologetically.

For answer Lady Alicia rose in her wrath and strode out of the room. Mr. Wycherly hastened after her across the little landing and down the curly staircase, but he was not in time to open the front door for her, and she banged it in his face. Mr. Wycherly opened it, and stood on the threshold just in time to hear the little gate at the bottom of the garden give an angry click as it fell behind Lady Alicia's retreating form. He did not attempt to follow

her, but stood where he was, wrapped in a reverie so absorbing that he started violently as the green gate slammed again, and Lady Alicia bustled up the path holding out her hand and saying:

"After all, it's not your fault; I don't know why I should scold you. The only redeeming feature in the whole horrible affair is that he's your nephew, and therefore cannot be an utter scoundrel; but you must confess it is very hard for me."

Mr. Wycherly took the extended hand and shook it. "You must forgive her," he said gently; "she would never have done it if she hadn't been your daughter. Think of the courage and determination——"

"The headstrong folly and foolhardiness," Lady Alicia interrupted. "I cannot imagine why you keep suggesting I could ever have done such a disgraceful thing. . . . I always had far too much——"

"Given the same circumstances, you would have behaved in exactly the same way," Mr. Wycherly interrupted. "My dear Lady Alicia, you know you would."

"You are a ridiculous and obstinate man," said Lady Alicia; "much learning hath made you mad, and you know nothing whatever about women."

All the same she smiled, and she left her hand in Mr. Wycherly's. It was not unpleasant to her to be considered capable of romance, her

life had been so safe and seemly always, a little monotonous and commonplace perhaps, but she had once been young.

"I don't know much," Mr. Wycherly answered humbly; "but surely character is the same in man or woman, and given a certain character a certain line of conduct is inevitable."

"And you think it is inevitable that I should forgive Margaret?"

"Assuredly," said Mr. Wycherly.

"As I said before"—here Lady Alicia thought fit to withdraw her hand—"you are an ignorant man; but we won't quarrel. Time will show whether you or I know most about *me*."

She turned to walk to the gate where her carriage was waiting. He helped her in, and shut the door upon her in absolute silence. Then, just as the man was driving off, he asked: "What do you think they would like for a wedding present?"

"Man, you are incorrigible," exclaimed Lady Alicia, but her brow was smooth and her eyes smiling.

Mr. Wycherly stood at the green gate for some time, lost in thought. As he turned to walk up the path to the house he said aloud: "I should like to know what that young man has done, that he should be singled out by the gods for such supreme good-fortune."

When the days grew long once more Lady Alicia came back to the "big house," but no

fair-haired Margaret came to play with the little boys.

"Where is she?" asked Montagu of his tutor; "why doesn't she come?"

"She is married," said Mr. Wycherly; "she has to stay with her husband."

"When I marry," said Montagu, "I shall marry somebody like Margaret, then she'll stay with me and I shall never be lonely."

"When you marry," Mr. Wycherly said very seriously, "take care of just one thing. Take care that she is kind."

"I'd like her to be beautiful, too," Montagu said eagerly; "beautiful and tall, like Margaret."

"I hope she will be beautiful, but kindness comes first," and Mr. Wycherly spoke with conviction, as one who knew.

"How can one tell if she is kind?" Montagu asked.

"Compare her with your aunt, Montagu; if she stands such comparison, she is all your best desires need seek."

"I will remember," Montagu said solemnly, "kind *and* beautiful—but the kindness must come first. I wish Margaret hadn't been in such a hurry; she would have done beautifully."

CHAPTER X

THE SABBATH

"He ordered a' things late and air';
He ordered folk to stand at prayer
(Although I cannae just mind where
He gave the warnin'),
An' pit pomatum on their hair
On Sabbath mornin'."

R. L. S.

THE Sabbath day at Burnhead was a long, long day—a day wholly given up to "the public and private exercises of God's worship."

For Montagu, indeed, the shadow of the Sabbath began to steal over the horizon as early as Friday night; and it was only when he woke on Monday morning, secure in the consciousness that the first day of the week was safely passed, that life assumed again its habitually cheerful aspect.

Miss Esperance was a stanch Presbyterian, and belonged to the strictest sect of the so-called Free Kirk. Therefore did she consider it her duty to take Montagu twice to church, in addition to superintending his instruction in Bible history and the Shorter Catechism.

Montagu liked the Scripture lessons well enough, and found it no hardship to read the Bible aloud to his aunt for hours at a time; but nearly four hours' church, with only the blessed interval of dinner in between, was a heavy discipline for even a naturally quiet small boy, and sometimes Montagu was, inwardly, very rebellious.

Mr. Wycherly begged him off the afternoon service as often as he could as a companion for Edmund, volunteering to look after both children so that Robina, as well as Elsa, could attend church. Mr. Wycherly was an Episcopalian, and, as there was no "English" church within walking distance, he said he read the service to himself every Sunday morning.

When Edmund was four years old, Miss Esperance decided that it was time he, too, should share the benefit of the Rev. Peter Gloag's ministrations. Edmund appeared pleased at the suggestion, for it was, like his knickerbockers, to a certain extent an acknowledgment that he had arrived at boy's estate. Montagu went to church, and why not he? It was evidently the correct thing to do, and although he could not remember to have seen his brother particularly uplifted by his privileges in that respect, nobody else seemed much exhilarated either. Hitherto he had spent his Sunday mornings largely in the society of Mr. Wycherly, who, as all toys were locked up in a tall cupboard on Saturday night, connived at all sorts

of queer games invented on the spur of the moment by the ingenious Edmund.

"I'm goin' to kirk, I'm goin' to kirk,' Edmund chanted gaily on the appointed day.

He wore a new white sailor suit with pockets, and in one pocket was a penny to "pirle" in the plate; in the other a wee packet of Wotherspoon's peppermints, for refreshment during the sermon. His curly hair was brushed till it shone like the brass knocker on the front door when Elsa had newly cleaned it, and his round, rosy face was framed by a large new sailor hat that looked like a substantial sort of halo. White socks and neat black shoes with straps completed Edmund's toilet, and his aunt thought that never yet had the Bethune family possessed a worthier scion.

Mr. Wycherly assisted to direct Edmund's fat pink fingers into a tight, white cotton glove, and stood at the green gate watching the departure of Miss Esperance and her great-nephews, till the small black figure with a little white sailor on either side had vanished from his view.

He marvelled greatly at the temerity of Miss Esperance in taking Edmund to church at this tender age, though it was not the age that mattered so much as Edmund. What Miss Esperance called the "Bethune temperament" was very marked in that sunny-haired small boy, and it was apt to manifest itself unexpectedly, wholly regardless of time or place.

The house seemed queerly quiet and deserted as Mr. Wycherly returned to his room. Mause followed him and thrust a cold, wet nose into his hand, looking up at him from under her tangled hair with puzzled, pleading eyes.

"Poor old lady," said Mr. Wycherly, "you are lonely too, are you? We'll go for a little walk when the bell stops."

The church was a bare, whitewashed, barn-like edifice, where none of the windows were ever opened, and the unchanged air was always redolent of hair-oil and strong peppermint.

Edmund smiled and nodded at his friends as he pattered up the aisle to his aunt's pew, and when Andrew Mowat, the precentor, looking unwontedly stern and unapproachable, took his seat under the pulpit, the little boy wondered what could have annoyed him that he looked so cross. On weekdays Andrew, who kept the little grocer's shop in the village, was the most sociable and friendly of creatures, and always bestowed "a twa-three acid-drops" on the little boys when they went with Robina to his shop.

But to-day Andrew was far removed from worldly cares or enjoyments, and Edmund listened to him in awed astonishment as he wailed out the tune of the first psalm, "My heart not haughty is, O Lord," to be gradually taken up more or less tunefully by the whole congregation.

For the first half-hour of service Edmund

behaved beautifully. He held a large Bible open upside down, with white cotton fingers spread well out over the back. He hummed the tune diligently and not too loud during the first psalm, and stood quite moderately still during the first long prayers.

It was not until the minister said: "Let us read in God's Word from the fifteenth chapter of the second Book of Kings beginning at the fifth verse," that the troubles of Miss Esperance really began.

At the announcement of the chapter to be read, there was an instantaneous fluttering and turning over of leaves among the congregation to find their places, and Edmund, zealous to be no whit behind the rest in this pious exercise, fluttered the leaves of his Bible violently to and fro for some time after everyone else had settled into seemly silence to follow the reading. Such a noisy rustling did he make that several of the congregation raised their heads and glanced disapprovingly in the direction of Miss Bethune's pew. That gentle lady laid a detaining hand over Edmund's Bible to close it, but he pulled it violently away from her with both hands, opened it again, and held it ostentatiously against his nose, leaning forward to look over the top at Montagu, who sat on the other side of his aunt.

Then, to the horror of Miss Esperance, he began to imitate the minister; joining in the reading wherever the oft repeated "And the

rest of the acts of"—wherever it happened to be—"are they not written," etc., in low but perfectly audible tones. Edmund evidently looked upon the phrase as a sort of chorus, waited for it, seized upon it, and joined in it gleefully, holding his Bible at arm's length, as though he were singing at a concert.

Poor Miss Esperance turned crimson, and bent over the little boy, whispering: "You must be *perfectly* quiet, my dear; you must not say a single word."

Edmund, still holding his Bible stiffly out in front of him, looked reproachfully at his aunt, and was quiet for a few minutes. Then came, "and the rest of the acts of Pekah, and all that he did," which was too much for him. The name was attractive: "Pekah! Pekah! Pekah!" he whispered; then faster: "Pekah, Pekah, Pekah, Pekah, Pekah, Pekah," exactly as he was wont to repeat: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper," which the minister's wife, herself, had taught him.

His aunt laid a firm hand over his mouth, and looked at him with all the severity her sweet old face could achieve. He realized that she was not to be trifled with, and set down his Bible on the bookboard in front of him with an angry thump, at the same time leaning forward to frown reprovingly at Montagu.

"When will *he* stop?" he whispered to his aunt, pointing a scornful finger at the minister; "he's making far more noise nor me."

"Hush!" murmured Miss Esperance again. For three minutes he was comparatively quiet; then it occurred to him to take off his gloves. This he achieved by holding the end of each cotton finger in his teeth and pulling violently. Then he blew into each one, as he had seen his aunt do with hers, finally squeezing them into a tight ball and cramming them into the tiny pocket of his blouse.

"Pocket" instantly suggested the pockets of his trousers. His penny had been disposed of on entrance—'twas but a fleeting joy. But the packet of Wotherspoon's sweeties remained. The minister had now engaged in prayer, the congregation was standing up; Edmund's doings were comparatively inconspicuous, and Miss Esperance permitted her thoughts to soar heavenwards once more. Edmund arranged the contents of his packet in a neat square on the top of his Bible on the bookboard in front of him, and proceeded to taste several of the little white comfits, putting each one back in its place, wet and sticky, when he had savoured its sweetness for a minute or two. By accident he knocked one of the unsucked sweeties off the Bible, and it rolled away gaily under the seat. In a moment Edmund had dived after it. He squeezed behind his aunt, and could not resist giving one of Montagu's legs a sharp pinch as he beheld those members, and nothing more, from his somewhat lowly and darksome position. Montagu leapt into the air with a scarcely

suppressed yelp, that startled more than Miss Esperance, who, at the same moment, felt an unwonted something shoving against *her* legs. She feared that some dog had got into the pew, and opened her eyes, only to find that one great-nephew had disappeared from her side and was squirming under the seat. She also beheld the neatly arranged rows of sweeties on the top of the Bible.

It took but a moment to sweep these into the satin bag she always carried, but it took considerably longer to restore Edmund to an upright position, and when this was achieved his face was streaked with dust, and his small, hot hands were black.

Edmund lolled; Edmund fidgeted; Edmund even infected Montagu, so that he fidgeted too. Every five minutes or so Edmund whispered, "Can we go home now?" till at last peace descended upon poor Miss Esperance, for in the middle of the sermon Edmund fell fast asleep with his head against her shoulder.

Miss Esperance looked quite pale and exhausted as she took her place at early dinner that day, but Edmund was rosy and cheerful, and greeted Mr. Wycherly as "dearie" with rapturous affection when that gentleman took his place at the bottom of the table. He always had dinner with the children on Sundays.

At first the small boys were so hungry that very little was said, but presently, when

pudding came, Mr. Wycherly asked: "Well, Edmund, how did you get on at church?"

Edmund laid down his spoon: "I'm never going back," he said decidedly; "it is a 'bomnable place."

"Edmund!" exclaimed Miss Esperance, "how can you say such a thing? You, unfortunately, did not behave particularly well, though I forgive that, as it was the first time; but remember, you will go to the church every Sunday, and you will learn to be a good boy when you're there."

"It is," Edmund repeated, unconvinced, "a 'bomnable place, a 'bomnation of desolation place."

The phrase had occurred several times in the earlier part of the minister's sermon before Edmund fell asleep, and commended itself to his youthful imagination as being singularly forceful and expressive.

Miss Esperance sighed. She really felt incapable of further wrestling with Edmund just then, and looked appealingly at Mr. Wycherly. But he dropped his eyes, and refused to meet her gaze.

"He," Edmund suddenly resumed, pointing with his spoon at Mr. Wycherly, "never goes there. *He*," with even more emphasis and the greatest deliberation, "is a—very—wise—man."

Here the naughty boy wagged his curly head, and spoke with such barefaced and perfect mimicry of his aunt that, again catching Mr.

Wycherly's eye, she burst into laughter, in which that gentleman was thankful to join her.

"More puddin', please!" Edmund exclaimed, seizing the propitious moment to hand up his plate.

That afternoon neither of the little boys accompanied Miss Esperance to church.

CHAPTER XI

LOAVES AND FISHES

"I am no quaker at my food. I confess I am not indifferent to the kinds of it."—CHARLES LAMB.

ON the following Sabbath day Edmund was a-missing directly it was time to get ready for church. He was to be found neither in house nor garden, and Miss Esperance came to the sorrowful conclusion that the Bethune temperament had again asserted itself, and that Edmund had, of deliberate purpose, effaced himself so that he should not be made to go to church. She was not on this occasion in the least perturbed by the fact that the small boy was lost. She had no fears as to his safety, but she was most grievously upset by this deliberate flying in the face of authority, and set off for church looking very grave and almost stern, with only Montagu in attendance.

Mr. Wycherly had shut himself in his room during the hunt for Edmund. He had a nervous dread of scenes of any kind, and when either of the little boys was punished he suffered horribly. He fully recognized the necessity

for occasional correction, especially in the case of a small boy so chock-full of original sin as Edmund. But none the less did he undergo much mental anguish on the occasions when such punishment took place. He could not altogether approve of certain of the methods of Miss Esperance, although he reverenced her far too much to indulge in any conscious criticism.

Remote had always been marked out from other houses by the immense tranquillity of its chief inmates, to whom fret and fuss were unknown. People were never scolded at Remote, unless by Elsa, when she was quite sure Miss Esperance was out of hearing.

When Montagu and Edmund were naughty they were punished by Miss Esperance, who always, and manifestly, suffered much more than the delinquents.

A favourite mode of correction in days when Miss Esperance was young was the substitution of bread and water for whatever meal happened to come nearest the time of the offence; and for the little boys poignancy was added to this dismal diet by the knowledge that their aunt tasted nothing else at her own meal during such times of abstinence for them. From such punishment, all suspicion of revenge—which, in the chastened one, so often nullifies the desired result—was entirely eliminated; and the children quite understood that they were being corrected for the good of their souls, and

not because their aunt required a vent for her annoyance at their misdeeds.

Sunday dinner, however—the day on which by his own request Mr. Wycherly took his midday meal with Miss Esperance and the children—had hitherto been exempt from any such punitive mortification of the carnal appetites. Indeed, Mr. Wycherly had imbued it with a certain Elizabethan flavour of festivity and cheerfulness, and here, greatly to his surprise, he was warmly seconded by Elsa, who grudged no extra cooking to make the Sabbath-day dinner particularly appetising. From the time that Mr. Wycherly had asserted his right to throw his all into the common lot, things had been easier at Remote, and old Elsa did not forget his enthusiastic eagerness to further her endeavours that her mistress should have a peaceful and proper breakfast.

Therefore when it became the established custom for Mr. Wycherly to carve the joint on Sundays, she was ever ready to fall in with any small plans he might make for the benefit of the little boys.

And now Edmund had been naughty on the Sabbath, and Mr. Wycherly knew what to expect.

Bread, watered by his tears, for Edmund. Bread, seasoned only by sorrowful reflection, for M[illegible]erance.

B[illegible] for hungry Edmund if he cried alo[illegible]re were ducks for dinner—large

fat ducks sent by Lady Alicia; Mr. Wycherly could smell the stuffing even now. Who would believe that the smell of sage and onions could bear so mournful a message?

The Greek characters of the *Philebus* he held in his hand danced before his eyes. He could not give his mind to the philosophy of beauty or the theory of pleasure. The doctrine of æsthetical, moral, and intellectual harmonies, pleasing as it was to him on ordinary occasions, failed to hold him just then, when all his mental vision was concentrated on a chubby, tearful figure whose misdeeds would debar him from duck for dinner.

Mr. Wycherly laid down his Plato and began to pace the room restlessly, finally taking up his stand at the window looking out on the garden. Where was that boy? Where had the monkey hidden himself? He was not with Mause, for Mr. Wycherly could see the old dog lying in a patch of sunshine on the little plot of grass.

He went back to his bookshelf for comfort: he wanted something human, something warm, and faulty, and sympathetic, and his eye lighted on "Tristram Shandy." "Tristram Shandy" was tight in the shelf—squeezed in between the *Phædo* and Hooker's "Ecclesiastical Polity"—Mr. Wycherly was nervous and agitated, and he must have pulled it out clumsily, for it fell to the ground with a thump.

As he stooped to recover it he caught sight of a plump brown leg protruding from beneath his sofa. He went down on his knees to look more closely, and there, cuddled up under the sofa, his curly head pillowed on his arm, lay Edmund, fast asleep. Edmund possessed a Wellingtonian capacity for falling asleep whenever he kept still. He had hidden under the sofa in Mr. Wycherly's room just before that gentleman took refuge there from the grieved annoyance of Miss Esperance at her grandnephew's defection. Mr. Wycherly had shut his door, and no one dreamt of disturbing him to look there for the missing one.

Here was a pretty kettle of fish!

Although Mr. Wycherly knew that Miss Esperance would exonerate him from any actual participation in Edmund's truancy, he was assuredly accessory after the fact, and what was to be done?

"I hope he won't hit his head when he wakes up," Mr. Wycherly thought concernedly. "What a beautiful child he is!" and he knelt on where he was, gazing admiringly at the slumbering cupid.

Stronger and stronger grew the savour of sage and onions throughout the little house. It penetrated even to Mause in the garden, and she arose from her patch of sunshine and sniffed inquisitively.

Mr. Wycherly grew stiff with kneeling, and rose to his feet. At the same moment Edmund

rolled over and hit his leg against the edge of the sofa. It woke him, and the instant Edmund awoke he was wide awake. "Dearie, are you zere?" he demanded. He could see Mr. Wycherly's legs, and no more, from where he was lying. In another minute he was sitting on Mr. Wycherly's knee, while that elderly scholar cudgelled his brains for some form of remonstrance which would bring home to this very youthful delinquent the impropriety of his conduct.

"Dearie," Edmund exclaimed with disarming sweetness, "aren't you glad I'm here wiv you?" Here he rubbed his soft face against Mr. Wycherly's. "What a good smell! isn't it? I'm so hungry: is there a bikkit about?"

Mr. Wycherly steeled his heart: "You know, sonnie," he said very gravely, "that you ought not to be here at all; you ought to be with your dear aunt in church."

Edmund looked at Mr. Wycherly in reproachful surprise. "In church?" he echoed, as though such a possibility had occurred to him for the first time that morning.

"In church," Mr. Wycherly repeated. "Your dear aunt expected you to go there with her and with Montagu, and she was very sad that she had to go without you. It was not right of you to hide, sonnie. It was neither kind nor polite nor straightforward."

"You doesn't go," Edmund argued, staring gloomily at Mr. Wycherly. "Why mus' I?"

"*You* must go because your dear aunt wishes it," Mr. Wycherly replied, ignoring the first part of Edmund's remark.

"Would you go if see wissed it?"

"I would. But, you see, for me it is different. I was brought up in a different kind of church, and I am no longer a little boy. Miss Esperance has never asked me to go to church with her."

"Why hasn't see as't you?"

"Because, as I tell you, I was brought up in a different church."

"Why can't I be brought up in your church? Then we needn't neither of us never go," Edmund suggested, smiling radiantly, as though he had solved the difficulty.

Mr. Wycherly sighed deeply. "But I did go," he exclaimed. "I always went when I was a little boy, every Sunday, and afterwards, at Oxford, I went nearly every day as well."

Edmund's face fell. He desired to belong to no church that required daily attendance. Mr. Wycherly's looks were so serious that the little boy began to be anxious.

"What will Aunt Esp'ance do, do you sink?"

"I fear she will feel compelled to punish you."

"Bed?" Edmund inquired uneasily.

"No, I fear, I very greatly fear, it will be dinner. . . ."

Mr. Wycherly felt the little figure stiffen in his arms as, without a word, Edmund laid his

head down on his old friend's shoulder. The child lay quite still, and, glancing down at him, Mr. Wycherly saw how the red mouth drooped at the corners and the blue eyes were screwed up tight to keep back the tears. No such dread contingency had crossed Edmund's mind till this moment, and it swept over him with devastating force. Not to share in the Sunday dinner, that cheerful meal, when Mr. Wycherly made jokes, and Aunt Esperance sat beaming in her Sunday silks; when hungry little boys were never refused two, even three, helpings of everything. It was a dreadful dispensation.

Edmund gave a short, smothered sob, and buried his face in Mr. Wycherly's neck.

"Perhaps," the grave voice went on, and Edmund opened one tearful eye, as though the gloom of his outlook were pierced by some ray of hope—"perhaps if you went to your aunt, and told her how sorry you are, and that you promise on your honour as a gentleman you will never try to get out of going to church again—perhaps she might forgive you this once. If you can tell her this, and mean it, my son, every word, I think that she may be induced to forgive you . . . just this once."

The green gate creaked; there was a rush of feet on the staircase as Montagu made straight for Mr. Wycherly's room.

"Here you are," he exclaimed. "I thought you'd be here somehow. . . . What's the matter?"

Mr. Wycherly put Edmund gently from off his knee, and rose from his chair.

"Wait here with Montagu, sonnie," he said; "I will see Miss Esperance first," and he left the room, carefully shutting the door behind him.

"Is Aunt Esp'ance very sorry?" Edmund asked anxiously. He did not ask if she were angry, for that she had never been with him.

"I don't think she's as sorry as she was at first," Montagu said consolingly. "We met Mrs. Gloag as we were coming out, and Aunt Esperance told how you'd hidden, and Mrs. Gloag laughed, and after that I don't think she was so sorry."

The door was opened, and Mr. Wycherly came back. "Go to your aunt in her room, Edmund," he said, "and remember what I told you."

Edmund trotted off obediently.

A few minutes later Robina rang the dinner-bell. Edmund and his aunt descended the curly staircase together, hand in hand.

"I told her I was sorry," he announced to Mr. Wycherly, who was waiting at the dining-room door that Miss Esperance might pass in first. "I'm going to church zis afternoon. I'm going," he added gleefully, "becos' zere's ducks for dinner."

CHAPTER XII

THE VILLAGE

"'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own."

POPE.

"OUR society may be small, but it is extremely select," Miss Maggie Moffat used to say on such occasions as friends from the south side of Edinburgh used to visit her.

"It is what we have always sought after," Miss Jeanie, her sister, would chime in. "Quality, not quantity, and nowhere could we have found superior quality if we had gone over the whole of the British Isles to look for it."

None of the earlier inhabitants of Burnhead ever quite fathomed how or why the Miss Moffats had come to live there. The fact remained, however, that one term-day they had taken a small house in the middle of the village street—a house that had been empty for many years. Its original name was Rowan Cottage, because there was a rowan-tree in the back garden; but when the Miss Moffats took it

they persuaded the landlord to change the name to Rowan Lodge, the only lodge in the neighbourhood save that which guarded the entrance at Lady Alicia's drive gate. The name was painted on the front of the house in large, clear characters, and it looked, the Miss Moffats thought, extremely well on the pink note-paper with scalloped edges which they affected in their correspondence.

They were ladies of uncertain age—that is to say, of the kind of age to which direct reference is never made.

They were not serenely and beautifully old like Miss Esperance, nor sturdily and frankly middle-aged like Lady Alicia, and by no stretch of imagination could they be considered young like bonnie Margaret. They were, as they themselves would have put it, "of a quite suitable age for matrimony, not giddy girls, you understand, but nice, sensible, douce young women."

Miss Jeanie was probably not more than forty-five, and Miss Maggie some six years older. They were both moderately tall, moderately stout, and of a healthy, homely aspect which did not challenge observation. Miss Jeanie, indeed, wore a curly fringe, and on muddy days a serge golf-skirt that barely reached her substantial ankles, but Miss Maggie's mouse-coloured hair was brushed back over a cushion, and displayed every inch of her intellectual forehead. Miss Maggie took in "Wise Words,"

and had literary leanings towards everything of an improving character.

At one time they had kept a "fancy-work emporium" on the south side, but they had not been dependent upon their sales of Berlin wool or crochet cotton, and, as the emporium was by no means thronged with customers, it had seemed good to them to retire from business and seek in the country that seclusion and select society which their genteel souls hungered after.

They were sincerely convinced that the emporium of the past could not in any way preclude their reception into such society.

"It could not exactly be called trade, me dear," Miss Maggie argued, "for you see our *clientèle* was so exceedingly select. We were never called upon to serve a man in all the years——"

"Not so very many years, Maggie," Miss Jeanie would interrupt.

"During the time our residence was above the emporium," Miss Maggie continued calmly. "That makes a very great difference. Anybody can come into an ordinary shop. A stationer's now—a man might burst into a stationer's at any minute to buy envelopes or elastic bands, or a bit rubber: but no man would dream of entering a—place where Berlin wools and fingering and sewing silks are to be had. And you know, me dear, it always seems to me that so long as no strange man has had the oppor-

tunity to accost one, one's delicacy cannot be said to have suffered in any way."

"I've heard," said Miss Jeanie, with a little sigh, "that in London one may be accosted on the public street. It must be terrible to be accosted by a strange man; I think I should faint away at his feet from sheer terror."

"Indeed," replied Miss Maggie, bridling, "*I* should do no such thing; I would freeze him with a glance."

So far, however, neither of these ladies had been called upon either to faint or to freeze. Mankind had passed them by in decorous silence. Neither of them had ever been accosted by anyone more alarming than a village urchin, and their delicacy and their gentility remained unimpaired. For truly they were vastly genteel.

The real and chief attractions of Burnhead had been that the rent of their modest residence was very small, that the "big house" was occupied by "a lady of title," and that there were only two other houses in the village having any claim to be the abodes of gentility—namely, the Manse and Remote.

"Surely," argued the Miss Moffats, "in such a small place the gentry will be friendly."

And so indeed it proved, for if the Miss Moffats were genteel they were also the kindest and most amiable of women, and had they but known it, they might have searched Scotland before they found a neighbourhood where such

qualities would have met with so swift a recognition from the three chief ladies in the place.

There were many who pitied the minister because his wife was so delicate. There were others, mostly outsiders, who pitied Mrs. Gloag because her husband was so stern. And because, although she had done her best to take root and bring forth the fruits of the Spirit in the humble vineyard where her husband worked, there was always something alien about her which most of that small community mistrusted.

For Mrs. Gloag was English.

It was even whispered that she was the daughter of an Episcopalian clergyman.

She was slender and pretty, and very frail in health : and twenty-seven years of Burnhead had not yet cured her of a tendency to laugh when things amused her. And things amused Mrs. Gloag which ought to have shocked a right-minded minister's wife.

In early days her chief offence had been that she looked younger than any minister's wife ought to have looked ; that she played with her little boys as though she were a child herself ; and that she had been known to yawn openly, and apparently unashamed, during the minister's sermons.

Now that her pretty, wavy hair was grey and her health so bad that she seldom came to church more than once on a Sabbath, sometimes not at all for weeks together, folks felt that this, and what happened to their third boy, was a

judgment on the minister for having married a person so Englishy and irresponsible as Mrs. Gloag.

There was no question whatever that the minister adored his wife. Whenever his eyes rested upon her his whole face changed and softened, and it was felt to be almost indecent that a minister should openly manifest any affection whatsoever.

Three tall sons had the minister—two of them well-doing young men, who passed examinations and won bursaries, and were as economical, hard-working, and clear-headed young Scotsmen as even a minister could wish to see. A little harsh, perhaps, and dictatorial, and argumentative; a little fond of airing their opinions unasked, a little apt to judge character wholly by failure or success in practical things; a little lacking in deference to older people. Still, they were fine, capable, upstanding young men of the "get up and git" order which is so admirable; and while Mr. Wycherly would go miles out of his way to avoid either of them, he was the very first to acknowledge their many excellent qualities.

But Curly, the youngest, was different. He was even more brilliant intellectually than his brothers; he was better looking, and he had much of his mother's charm. When he was eighteen he won a scholarship at Balliol, a regular blue-ribbon among scholarships, and the minister was a proud man.

Curly did well at Oxford; he lived sparely and took tutorships in the vacations, and when he came home the Manse was a merry place. Mr. Wycherly was very fond of Curly, for he came and talked about Oxford, and he would ask the older scholar's opinion about many things, and seemed to think it quite worth having. Now, his brothers considered Mr. Wycherly a failure, effete, played out, *vieux-jeu*, and Mr. Wycherly knew it.

Curly took a good degree, and then the blow fell. He became an actor, and "went on the stage."

Had he turned forger or robbed a church the minister could hardly have been more upset. Mr. Gloag hated the theatre and everything connected with it. He honestly believed it to be morally degrading and soul-soiling to enter the doors of any such place of amusement. That there could ever, under any circumstances, be found any common ground or bond of union, or even mutual toleration, between the followers of this degraded and degrading calling and professing Christians, he could not conceive. The minister had no belief in toleration. He was fond of saying, "Those that are not for us are against us," and that "us" might by any possibility include persons he designated as "mountebanks" never for one moment entered his head.

He forbade the mention of Curly's name, declaring that now he had only two sons.

Curly's brothers said very little. They thought Curly a fool; but after all he knew his own business best.

Mrs. Gloag said nothing at all. She grew frailer and frailer, and her pretty eyes wore always a strained expression, as though they were tired with watching for one who never came.

She did not attempt to soften the minister. He was always gentle to her; but she knew him too well not to discern when argument and supplication were alike useless. She laughed less often now, and when no one was watching her gentle face was very sad.

If anything, however, this sore trouble made her kinder and more sympathetic than before, so that when the Miss Moffats took sittings in the church, and she, in her capacity of minister's wife, went to see them, she realized at once how anxious and timid and kind and harmless they were; and, most of all, how they hungered to be admitted to the inner circle of the "select."

She asked Miss Esperance to go and see them, and Miss Esperance went; and she asked Lady Alicia to go and see them, and Lady Alicia went.

That was a great, a never-to-be-forgotten day for the Miss Moffats when Lady Alicia walked over from the "big hoose" to call. They could have wished she had come in the carriage; it would have looked so fine in the

street for all the world to see. But Lady Alicia was energetic and inclined to grow stout, and she liked to walk when she could. There she sat in the Miss Moffats' best room, talking affably in her big voice. Everything about Lady Alicia was big and decided, and every simplest remark she made was treasured by the Miss Moffats as the sayings of a sibyl. She didn't stay long, but she praised the arrangements of Rowan Lodge, from the window curtains to the chocolate-coloured railings in front of the windows.

When she got up to go the Miss Moffats watched her anxiously. She had her silver card-case in her hand. Would she leave a card or not?

Alas! in their eagerness to be polite they both accompanied her into the narrow passage, and thence into the street. And Lady Alicia, being rather crowded, did not see the Benares bowl on the little table in the lobby, wherein reposed the visiting cards of Miss Esperance and Mrs. Gloag, and completely forgot to leave a similar memento of her visit.

This was a great blow to the Miss Moffats. Without the outward and visible sign of a visiting card was it a proper call or not?

Might they return it? or was it only an act of condescension on Lady Alicia's part, and not an act of friendship?

Miss Jeanie sought vainly in the pages of a bound volume of the *Lady's Home Companion*

for guidance on this intricate point of etiquette. But although there was a whole long article on "calls" in that useful work, with minute directions as to the most desirable deportment at afternoon tea, there was no guidance as to what course should be taken by two genteel unmarried females when visited by an earl's daughter who called at three in the afternoon and omitted to leave a card at all.

"It's most annoying!" Miss Jeanie exclaimed, tapping the *Lady's Home Companion* with her finger; "there's any amount about leaving cards, but not one word about when they're not left. Listen to this: 'Should there be only a lady, you would merely leave one of your husband's.' Perhaps Lady Alicia Carruthers just didn't leave one of his because he's dead, poor man. Then further on it says: 'When calling on a stranger on any *business* matter, your card should be sent in by the servant, who will ascertain if it is convenient for her mistress to see you.' Now, she most certainly did not call on business. What *are* we to think, Maggie?"

Miss Maggie puckered her intellectual forehead in deep consideration of the weighty matter. Apparently she reached no conclusion, for after a minute she said: "I'm thinking, Jeanie, that our best course would be to ask Miss Esperance Bethune; she seems very intimate with Lady Alicia Carruthers, and may know her ways; and I'm quite sure she'll think

none the worse of us for asking. *She* left a card, if you remember."

"You might just put on your bonnet and go now, Maggie. It would set our minds at rest. I wish she had left a card, though—it would have looked fine on the table in the lobby; and you mind the Macdougals are coming out to their tea on Saturday."

Miss Moffat sought Miss Esperance then and there, and that gentle little lady gave it as her opinion that the omission of the card was mere forgetfulness on Lady Alicia's part, and by no means intentional. Whereupon Miss Maggie departed much comforted.

Miss Esperance happened to be dining with Lady Alicia that very evening, and told her how much soul-searching her visit had occasioned the Miss Moffats.

"Bless me!" good-natured Lady Alicia exclaimed; "the poor bodies! I'd have left a whole card-case of cards if I'd remembered. But they fluttered round me so as I was leaving, and were so civil and obliging, and desperately fussy, that I got myself out as quickly as ever I could."

"You'd make them very happy if you'd leave a card even yet, any time you are passing," Miss Esperance suggested; "they are such good, meek creatures."

So it came to pass that next day when Lady Alicia went out to drive the carriage stopped at Rowan Lodge, and she, in a

voice that could be heard all down the street, instructed her footman to leave cards, explaining that she had forgotten to leave them yesterday.

The front door of Rowan Lodge was separated from the footpath by about three feet of gravel, and the Miss Moffats, seated behind the curtains that Lady Alicia had admired, heard her every word.

"One for each of us!" exclaimed Miss Jeanie rapturously, gloating over the little white cards, for them so packed with meaning. "I hope it's not wicked, but I can't help feeling rather glad poor Mr. Carruthers is no more—though it would have been pleasant enough to have him calling too—for then, if that book is right, we should only have had his card, and he hadn't a title or anything."

"He was an advocate, I'm told," Miss Maggie said solemnly; "but whether they put that on cards I'm not very sure, never having been called upon by anyone connected with the legal profession except yon wee auctioneer, who came about the fittings at the south side; and I very much doubt if he had a card at all."

"The Macdougals 'll rather open their eyes when they see these," Miss Jeanie chuckled. "I'll put one on each side the Benares bowl in the lobby, lest they shouldn't look inside. I hope it'll be a nice bright day, for it's a wee thing dark there when the door's shut, and if

it's left open there's a terrible draught, and they might blow away."

"If it's a mirk day," Miss Maggie said firmly, "I'll stand them up against the parlour clock just careless-like. You may depend the Macdougals will spy them out."

CHAPTER XIII

A MEETING

"We two will stand beside that shrine,
Occult, withheld, untrod,
Whose lamps are stirred continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud."

D. G. ROSSETTI.

WHEN Edmund was five years old Mr. Wycherly expressed his readiness to teach him all he was teaching Montagu. He took infinite pains to do so, but Edmund's presence was found to be so provocative of dispeace in the quiet study upstairs, and so effectually hindered his brother's progress, while his own was of the slowest, that Miss Esperance took the matter into her own hands, and sent her younger nephew to be instructed by the Rev. Peter Gloag, who seasoned his instruction with the tawse, and was altogether more fitted to cope with the average boy's vagaries than the gentle, dreamy Mr. Wycherly. Edmund was rather afraid of the minister. His hand was heavy, and he was singularly awake to the

devices by means of which small boys seek to evade their scholastic duties. Nevertheless, the child liked him, for he could unbend on occasion, and was an excellent hand at marbles. Moreover, he had a sense of humour, and, like so many of the Scottish Calvinists of that time, managed to keep his denunciations of abstract sins quite separate from his judgment of the sinner. In the pulpit he was a terror to evil-doers. When tackled upon questions of doctrine, he laid down the law with a vigour and determination that left his opponent with the impression that never was there such a hard and inflexible man; but when it came to deeds, when it was a question of giving another chance to a ne'er-do-weel, or the punishment to be meted out to some young ragamuffin caught stealing apples or breaking windows, the sinner had far rather fall into the hands of the minister than those of many a gentler-spoken man.

In spite of the minister's endeavours, however, Edmund was still laboriously writing sentences to the effect that "'Tis education forms the mind" at an age when Montagu had begun to write Latin verses and to read "Xenophon."

"I hate sitting on a chair and hearing things," Edmund would say. "I want to be doing them; I want more room than there is in auntie's house, or the Manse; I *hate* things over my head 'cept the sky."

One day Miss Esperance drove both boys to Leith, and left them to play on the beach while she went to see an old friend. In a minute Edmund had off his shoes and socks, and, in spite of the jagged pebbles that hurt his unaccustomed feet so cruelly, went down to the water's edge and in up to his knees; then, turning to the more timid Montagu, who still stood dubiously upon the brink, cried joyously: "*This* is what I've always been wanting; there's *plenty* of room out there."

The same evening he climbed on to Mr. Wycherly's knee, demanding: "How can I get to be a sailor like my daddie was?"

"You go into the navy."

"How do I go? What way? Where's the navy? Is it a town?"

"No, it's an institution, a service——"

"Like the poorshouse?" Edmund interrupted, in less enthusiastic tones.

"Oh, dear no."

"Tell me all about it," the little boy commanded; whereupon Mr. Wycherly obediently and at considerable length explained the constitution of His Majesty's navy, and Edmund never once interrupted.

When Mr. Wycherly had finished, the little boy was silent for a minute, then asked earnestly: "How soon can I go?"

"Let me see, you're nearly eight now; it might be managed in about three years. You will need to read well, and write well, and be

able to do many kinds of sums, and be very obedient."

"I could do all that," Edmund said decidedly, and in the end, to the surprise of everyone concerned, he did.

At first it grieved Mr. Wycherly that anyone should teach either of the little boys except himself. He grudged Edmund to the minister, even while he knew that the minister was far more fitted to teach him than he was himself. His only consolation was, that as Edmund disliked lessons so much, there would have been some danger of his extending his dislike to the giver of them, and that Mr. Wycherly could not have borne.

It happened that soon after Edmund first went for lessons to the Manse whooping-cough broke out among the village children. It was a bad kind, and Miss Esperance was very anxious that neither Montagu nor Edmund should take it. Thus it came about that one Sunday, one particularly fine Sunday at the beginning of June, she decided that she would not take them to church with her for fear of infection. The doctor himself had suggested this only the day before, and, after a sleepless night, in which she had prayed for guidance, Miss Esperance decided that the doctor was probably right, and that she should run no risks for them, whatever she might do for herself. Mr. Wycherly offered to look after them both during her absence, and it was charac-

teristic of Miss Esperance that, although she had her misgivings, she made no suggestions as to how their time should be spent in her absence. That would have been to reflect upon Mr. Wycherly.

The little boys will always remember that Sunday, not only because they did not go to church, and did play in a field near the Manse, but because of something that happened.

When the church bells had stopped, and the village street was deserted, Mr. Wycherly, the two little boys, and Mause went to play in a field that adjoined the Manse. To get to this field, which was rich in buttercups and hedge-parsley, and was bordered by ash-trees, giving a pleasant shade, you turned down a lane, which was also a short cut to the station, lying a mile or so south of the village. The Manse was at one end of the lane, the main street of the village at the other, the gate leading into the field about half-way down. As the little boys neared it they saw a stranger coming from the opposite direction.

It was unusual to meet anybody in that lane, especially at this time of day on the Sabbath, and the children waited at the gate to see the stranger pass. Mr. Wycherly, whose long-distance sight was failing a little, put up his eye-glasses, lest he might know the stranger and pass him by without greeting, as he was rather prone to do. Hardly had he placed the glasses on his nose than they dropped off again,

and, with an exclamation of surprise, he hurried forward, holding out both his hands, which the stranger grasped and warmly shook.

He was a tall young man, with very large bright eyes and an abundance of curly black hair, worn rather longer than was usual at that time.

He seized Mr. Wycherly by the arm and bore him up the lane again, talking eagerly the while.

"I must see her," the little boys heard him say. "I must see her somehow, and I daren't go into the house, for he has forbidden me. Could you tell her? Could you fetch her? I'll stay with the youngsters. Oh, dear old friend, for God's sake don't frighten her, but bring her to me somehow. She isn't in church, I know, for I watched everyone go in from behind the hedge in the churchyard. I was coming to you in any case. . . ."

Mr. Wycherly and the young man had passed out of earshot. Montagu and Edmund looked at one another with large round eyes, and Mause looked after Mr. Wycherly and sniffed the air inquiringly.

"Do you think he's a relation?" Edmund asked. "Do you think he's come to stay with us?"

"He can't stay with us," Montagu answered decidedly; "there isn't any room. I wish he could, though," he added; "he looks rather nice."

A sound of quick footsteps in the lane, and the stranger was back again, but without Mr. Wycherly.

"Now," he said, "what shall we play at?"

He said it in a business-like way, and Edmund did the stranger the honour to take him at his word.

"Can you be a tiger?" he demanded excitedly, "and we'll hunt you. You must crawl on the grass, and crouch in the ditch—it's quite dry—and bounce out at us and growl—not too loud, because it's the Sabbath."

Never was such a tiger—so fierce, so elusive, so dashing, so unexpected. This man threw himself into his part at once, and required no tedious explanations. The intrepid hunters had a quarter of an hour's blissful excitement, and the tiger had rolled over dead for the fifth time, when he suddenly rose to his feet, went to the gate, and looked up the lane towards the Manse.

Mr. Wycherly was coming slowly down the lane, and a lady leant upon his arm. The quondam tiger brushed some grass from off his clothes and turned to the little boys who were following him eagerly: "Boys," he said, "we've had a good play; we'll have another some day, but now I must go and speak—to my mother. . . ."

He went down the lane very quickly towards Mr. Wycherly and the lady.

"Come," said Montagu, catching Edmund by

the hand, "let's come away," and the two little boys trotted off up the lane in the opposite direction; and they never looked back.

Mrs. Gloag, tremulous and very pale, leant heavily on Mr. Wycherly's arm as the tall young man came out of the field towards her. Then she steadied herself. "Dear friend," she said very softly, "I am quite strong. Will you leave me to wait for my boy? I would like to be with him alone—once more, together—he and I." She drew her hand from Mr. Wycherly's arm, and he raised his hat and left her. He passed the stranger, and hurried after the little boys. They heard him coming, and slackened their pace; but they never looked round.

They had turned the corner when Mr. Wycherly joined them, and separated that he might walk between them, as was his custom. He laid a hand on each soft little shoulder and stopped. "Boys," he said, and his voice sounded husky and broken, "you are gentlemen—and good fellows—and I'm proud of you."

The little boys were silent. This that had happened, coming so close upon the heels of the uproarious tiger game, was very puzzling.

Presently, as though following some train of thought, Edmund said: "She knew him, I suppose. Will our mothers know us, do you think, when we get up there? Because, you see, we shall look rather different to when they

saw us last. Now you, Guardie dear—you hadn't white hair when you saw your mother last, had you? You were quite a little boy."

"I think," said Mr. Wycherly, "in fact, I may say I am sure, that our mothers will know us, even if we all three should have white hair."

"I expect," Montagu said thoughtfully, "that they're waiting just like we waited for you round the corner; they've just gone on first."

"Just gone on," Edmund echoed. "I wonder if it seems long to them till we come."

After morning service, when the minister turned down the lane which was a short cut to the Manse, he found Mr. Wycherly waiting for him outside his own gate.

As a rule, Mr. Wycherly was rather shy and nervous in the presence of the minister, but there was no sign of this usual mental perturbation as he stopped him with a courteous gesture. "Mr. Gloag," said Mr. Wycherly, and he looked the minister straight in the eyes, "I have done something which you will probably disapprove and condemn. Curly has been here, and I went to the Manse and told Mrs. Gloag that he was here."

"Did he dare to enter my house?" asked the minister, and he glowered at Mr. Wycherly from under his heavy brows.

"I think," that gentleman replied, and he met the minister's keen glance with one that was quite equally combative, "that he would

have dared anything to see his mother. As it happened, she came to him. And I want to spare her the exertion of telling you that she did so."

"Since when," asked the minister, looking as though he would greatly like to annihilate Mr. Wycherly—"since when has my wife needed a go-between to spare her the necessity of telling me anything?"

"Good heavens, sir!" Mr. Wycherly exclaimed, "can't you see that what I want you to realize is that Mrs. Gloag is very ill—that whatever you may feel on the subject of Curly's coming, it would have been inhuman to prevent her seeing her son—once more, whatever he had done?"

Even as Mr. Wycherly spoke the eyes of the two men that a moment before had been bright with mutual antagonism changed—the minister's to a dumb agony, Mr. Wycherly's to an awestruck pity. He turned and walked hastily away.

Blindly the minister opened the gate, and went through the garden into his own house.

His wife met him in the hall, and her face, he thought, was as the face of an angel, full of a soft radiance not of earth.

"Peter," she said, in her soft "Englishy" voice, "God has been good to me. I have seen Curly, and he is not changed. I know it; we may not like what he has done, but *he* is not changed. He is good, Peter; he is our own,

dear, good boy all the same. He didn't come in because he thought you wouldn't like it; but I had a long, beautiful talk with him in the lane. I felt somehow that I should see him—once more."

Again the ominous phrase "once more."

"Felicity," said the minister, "you have stood much longer than is good for you," and he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the sofa in the parlour.

She caught him round the neck and rubbed her soft cheek against his hair. "Why are you not surprised . . . and angry?" she asked with a little nervous laugh, and he felt how her whole body was trembling in his arms.

"Because I knew already," said the minister; and not one other word did he say on the subject that day, but he noticed that her pretty eyes had lost their look of strained expectancy and watchfulness, and in its place there was an expression of beautiful serenity and almost joyous content.

Although Edmund went to the Manse for his lessons, he was faithful always to the matutinal service of biscuits in Mr. Wycherly's room. He wouldn't have missed it on any account. Two mornings after their encounter with the "tiger-man," as they always called him, they sought Mr. Wycherly after breakfast, to find him looking very grave and sad. He gave them their biscuits as usual, and turning to Edmund, said: "You must not go to the Manse this

morning, my dear boy. There is great trouble there. We have all lost a very dear friend . . . Mrs. Gloag." Mr. Wycherly paused, for he could not speak. The little boys looked very solemn, then Edmund said softly: "I suppose she has gone on."

CHAPTER XIV

A PARTING

"O royal and radiant soul,
Thou dost return, thine influences return
Upon thy children as in life, and death
Turns stingless!"

W. E. HENLEY.

WHOOPING-COUGH was still bad in the village on the Sabbath following their famous tiger-game, and again Miss Esperance did not take her great-nephews to church.

Again, moreover, the Sunday was memorable, not so much because they did not attend church, as because Mr. Wycherly did.

The little boys knew there had been a funeral the day before; Mr. Wycherly had gone to it, and their aunt had sewn a black band upon the sleeve of each little white blouse. They felt solemn and important; and for once they would even have been glad to go to church in order to show this unusual adornment. When they discovered that not only were they to be left at home, but left at home without Mr. Wycherly, such immunity was shorn of all its more pleasing attributes.

They were sorry about Mrs. Gloag with the curious impersonal sorrow that children experience in considering the troubles of others. She was a kind lady, and they liked her. She knew many rhymes and funny stories, and was almost as good a playmate as that unequalled tiger-man. But they had not seen her often lately, and at present their chief concern was with the unusual and uncomfortable sense of depression that seemed in some subtle, indefinable fashion to separate them from their aunt and Mr. Wycherly.

And now, having gone to a funeral on Saturday, Mr. Wycherly was going to church on Sunday. Why was Mr. Wycherly going to church?

That was the question that grievously exercised the little boys, and perhaps Mr. Wycherly, himself, would have been hard put to it to explain his reasons.

There was the protective instinct, the feeling that he could not let Miss Esperance go alone, so small and sad and solitary: the desire to do something comforting: an equally strong desire to show his affectionate respect for Mrs. Gloag, and the hope that perhaps by this means he might to some small extent show his sympathy with the minister. And at the back of all these mixed motives, and through every one of them, there sounded the voices of habit and tradition —voices which every day of late had called more and more imperatively to Mr. Wycherly.

In the old days it had been a matter of course that he should take part in any public ceremony; now, in spite of his long aloofness from any part or lot in the lives of his neighbours, he felt it incumbent upon him to make some open and public demonstration of his share in this common sorrow.

When he first came to live with Miss Esperance, Mrs. Gloag had always been kind and friendly, stopped him in the road when he would fain have passed her by, and yet always left him unconsciously cheered by her greeting. Few others had been kind and friendly then, and Mr. Wycherly did not forget.

It was surprising how many people remembered such things of her now. It seemed that every man, woman, and child in the village could and did tell of something kind Mrs. Gloag had done, of something merry and heartening she had said. People forgot now that she had sometimes laughed when it would have been more fitting to look grave. They only remembered that she had cheered the despondent, strengthened the weak-hearted, made peace where there were quarrels, and brought gaiety and good-humour into homes where before there were gloom and discontent.

Not for years had the church been so full as on that Sabbath morning, that sunny Sabbath morning when Mr. Wycherly went to church with Miss Esperance.

The minister looked much as usual. His face was stern and set, though his eyes under the bushy, overhanging grey eyebrows were the eyes of a man who had slept but little. Yet his voice was strong and full, and he prayed and read the Bible with his customary earnestness and vigour.

The congregation were a little fluttered to notice that in the Manse pew there were three tall young men, and that the white-haired, Oxfordy gentleman who lived with Miss Esperance was in her seat; but otherwise the service was much as usual.

It was not until the time came for the sermon that there was throughout the congregation that little thrill of excited expectation which proclaims deep interest.

"What would be the minister's text?"

To most people it was a surprise: it was not even a whole text. The minister preached upon the four words, "Be pitiful, be courteous." His sermon was the shortest he had ever given in that church, lasting only half an hour.

Mr. Wycherly sat with his elbow on the desk in front of him, his white slender hand shading his eyes.

Miss Esperance was visibly affected; and of the three young men in the Manse seat, one laid his head down on his crossed arms, but he assuredly was not sleeping.

When the service was over and Mr. Wycherly and Miss Esperance were walking home, she

said timidly: "It was a beautiful discourse, don't you think?"

"I think," said Mr. Wycherly, "that he preached that sermon for his wife, and that it will be remembered when all his other sermons are forgotten. I am glad to have been there."

That afternoon the little boys took their Sunday picture-books into the garden, and sat on the grass under the alder-tree; Mr. Wycherly, too, sat in a garden chair reading a sober-looking calf-bound book.

Miss Esperance had returned from afternoon church, but she was so tired and upset that Elsa persuaded her for once to go and lie down in her room, and the children were warned not to disturb their aunt.

Edmund's book was a large Bible Alphabet with gaily-coloured pictures, which Miss Maggie Moffat had given him at the New Year. Montagu had brought out "Peep of Day," a work he detested, but choice on the Sabbath was limited in the house of Miss Esperance, so he looked at the Child's Bible Alphabet with Edmund, and so often had they pored over the volume that they were familiar with all the characters from Abraham to Zacchæus.

Presently Edmund shut the book with a bang: "I shall know all these folks when I meet 'em, anyway," he said decidedly. "I've looked at 'em and looked: I've had enough of seeing them, Isaac and Noah and Jacob and Mrs. Potiphar and that dancing woman, Miriam—

none of them very handsome, either," Edmund continued discontentedly. "Oh, I do wish the Sabbath was over, it's such a long, long day."

"I wonder," said Montagu musingly, "why the Bible people are always so ugly in pictures; so red and blue: real people aren't as ugly as that, even if they are a bit plain. Can you tell how it is, Guardie dear? D'you suppose they're really like the people in Edmund's book?"

"I expect," Mr. Wycherly said cautiously, laying down his "Alcestis" and smiling at Montagu's earnest, upturned face, "that they were very like the people we see every day, some neither very handsome nor very plain, some beautiful and delightful."

"I shall be disappointed," Edmund remarked, "if after all they turn out to be different to what they are in my book, after I've taken so much trouble to know them, when Aunt Esperance covers the little poem at the bottom, and the letter, you *do* think they'll be like they are here, don't you?" he asked anxiously.

"I fear not," Mr. Wycherly said, shaking his head; "we can't tell what they were like. You see, the artists who made the pictures in your book could only give their idea of the people they wished to represent. . . ."

"Then they aren't kind of fortygraphs," Edmund exclaimed aghast; "I shan't really know them when I meet them after all . . . they may be quite different. What a shame!"

"I wish we might have the Theogony out on

Sunday," Montagu grumbled; "the people there are pretty enough. Do you think we could, Guardie dear?"

"I fear not; I don't think Miss Esperance would like it."

"Is your book a Sunday book?" Edmund asked severely.

"Well, no, perhaps not exactly; it is a very beautiful play."

"What's a play?"

"Something that can be acted."

"Is it wicked to act?"

"No, I don't think so . . . but there are people——"

"Why, then, did Elsa say the tiger-man was wicked?" Edmund interposed. "He's an actor, isn't he?"

Mr. Wycherly was spared an answer to this question, as at that very moment someone was seen coming through the garden towards them —a tall young man in black, who proved to be none other than the tiger-man himself.

The boys rushed at him, shouting joyfully: "Oh tiger-man, have you come to play with us? You promised you would, you know."

"I've come to say good-bye," he said, as each child seized a hand and hung on to him. "I have to go to-night."

"But you'll have a little play with us first—just one? It's been such a long Sabbath, and it isn't nearly tea-time yet."

Edmund's voice was very piteous.

"Poor mites!" said the tiger-man. "I'll tell you what we'll do: you go down to the bottom of the garden, under the trees, and wait for me five minutes. Then I'll come to you, and we'll do *something*—it mustn't be noisy—but we'll make some sort of a play. Just let me have five minutes with Mr. Wycherly here—see, there's my watch; when the five minutes are up you give me a call."

As he spoke he took off his watch and chain and gave it to Montagu. The little boys ran to the end of the garden and waited by the wall.

"He must have climbed over," Edmund said. "I suppose it isn't very high when your legs are so long."

"Edmund," said Montagu very seriously, "I don't think we ought to bother him to play. He looks very sorry. You see, his mother's just dead—perhaps he doesn't feel at all like playing. . . . You see, before, when he had that lovely game, he was just going to see her . . . now. . . ."

Edmund's face fell. The tiger-man's advent had seemed a direct interposition of Providence on his behalf. Now it appeared that he was not to avail himself of it after all.

"Shan't you call him when it's the five minutes?" he asked.

"No," said Montagu; "it would be kinder not, don't you think?"

Edmund's mouth went down at the corners. "It's been so mizzable all day," he sighed;

"Aunt Esperance is sorry, and Guardie is sorry, and now you're sorry, and say he mustn't play wiv me. How long must people keep on being sorry? He *said* he'd play his own self."

Montagu was puzzled. He sympathized with his small brother—it had been a long, dull day for him, too—but yet he felt that the tiger-man ought not to be bothered. Montagu was sensitive and sympathetic, and even as he had caught sight of the tiger-man walking up the path he realized that it was a different tiger-man from the one of a week ago who had rolled over and over in the grass so joyously.

He looked at the watch in his hand. "It's mor'n five minutes now," he said. "You can call if you like; I shan't."

But Edmund did not call. Montagu moved nearer his little brother and put his arm round him. "We ought to be sorry for the tiger-man, you know," he said softly. "He's like Guardie and us now."

Edmund leaned against Montagu and sighed. It really was a very sad and puzzling day.

"Surely it's more than five minutes," said a voice behind them; and there was the tiger-man, pale certainly, with red rims round his eyes, but evidently ready to play.

"Do you mind? Are you sure you don't mind?" Edmund asked eagerly. "If you'd rather not, we'd rather not, too."

The tiger-man sat down on the rough grass

near the wall—it was one of his agreeable qualities that he was ready to sit down anywhere at any moment. He held out his hand to each of the little boys, and they sat down one on each side and cuddled up against him.

"You're jolly decent little chaps," he said, "and I know just what you mean; but I'd like to keep my promise, because—well, most of all, because she'd like me to. So now I'll try and be amusing."

And he was amusing. Edmund forgot his low spirits, and rolled over and over on the grass in paroxysms of stifled laughter at the things the tiger-man did and said.

All too soon the game ended. The tiger-man put on his watch, and kissed both the little boys in farewell. "Good-bye," he said; "I'm afraid it will be some time before we meet again, but I shan't forget you."

"We shan't forget *you*. Good-bye, good-bye," called the little boys, watching the tiger-man as he vaulted lightly over the wall. Montagu ran after him. "I'd like to whisper," he said breathlessly.

The tiger-man leant over the wall, and Montagu caught him round the neck.

"Although we laughed and enjoyed it so," he whispered, "we *are* sorry, we really are."

The tiger-man kissed Montagu once more, but this time he said nothing at all.

CHAPTER XV

THE BETHUNE TEMPERAMENT

"For courage mounteth with occasion."
KING JOHN.

"IT is curious, is it not," Miss Esperance said to Mr. Wycherly, "how entirely those two dear boys differ in character? Sometimes I think that Montagu must be like his mother's family. He is certainly not like ours."

"I am not sure that fundamentally Montagu is so very unlike you, Miss Esperance. In some ways, too, he strikes me as resembling Edmund, though not on the surface. I don't think that you need feel disturbed; Montagu is a Bethune *au fond*, although he may seem milder and perhaps—er—less strenuous than Edmund."

Miss Esperance shook her head, unconvinced.

"No," she said; "from all I remember of my brothers and myself, and from what I know of my dear father, I don't think Montagu is one of us. Edmund is absolutely a Bethune for good or ill—and there's a great deal of ill, mind, in our characters. But Montagu is too reflective,

too slow to act. He is not impulsive, like the rest of us; and look how serene he is! He is hardly ever in a temper, and the Bethunes have always been so hot-tempered and high-spirited."

They were sitting at table in the evening, while Mr. Wycherly drank his wine, and he smiled as he looked at the pretty old lady opposite, with the soft lamp-light shining on her white hair—the old lady who laid claim to such violent characteristics with such calm assurance. He did not point out to her that it was her beautiful serenity that set so wide a gulf between her and more easily ruffled ordinary mortals. He said nothing, but he smiled, and Miss Esperance saw the smile.

"You must not think," she continued, "that I in any way regret Montagu's dissimilarity. He is a most kind and unselfish boy—a dear, dear boy! And I wouldn't have him different if I could. But he is not like my people. He has the scholar's temperament. He weighs and considers. He would never act upon impulse, and sometimes I wonder whether he is not lacking in the dash and courage that have always marked our race—those qualities that Edmund possesses in so marked a degree—together with so many others that are quite undesirable."

Mr. Wycherly ceased to smile. "Do you know," he said, "it is a most curious thing, and, I suppose, the result of association, but

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Monta ay through the village,
past sor.e of the poorer cottages, and from one of these came Jamie Brown, a barefooted laddie about Montagu's own age, but rather bigger.

As usual, Montagu had hold of Mr. Wycherly's hand, and there was something in the sight of the two figures walking along so primly together that annoyed Jamie excessively.

Neither Edmund nor Montagu was allowed to play with the village boys; about this Miss Esperance was most firm and particular. But all the same Edmund knew, and was hail-fellow-well-met with them all, and contrived many a sly game of "tippenny-nippenny" or "papes," and many a secret confab on his way to and fro from the Manse. They all liked Edmund, and Edmund liked them. He could talk broad Scots, and did, whenever he got the

chance, although if his aunt heard him she severely discouraged his efforts, even going so far as to forbid the use of certain somewhat lurid, if expressive, adjectives. But Montagu, who spent so much of his time with Mr. Wycherly, was not drawn towards the village boys. Their loud voices and rough manners repelled him; he was naturally shy, and held himself aloof. Hence he was despised and disliked as "Englishey" and stuck up.

Jamie Brown danced out into the middle of the road on his noiseless bare feet, and walked mincingly in front of Mr. Wycherly and Montagu, looking back over his shoulder from time to time to remark tauntingly: "This is you, mim's milk, like a puggie, a wee Englishey puggie, in a red coatie jimp an' sma'. Whaur's yer organ? Wull yon auld gentleman no gies a chune? Puggie! Puggie! wha's a wee puggie!"

Montagu turned very red, but said nothing. Mr. Wycherly had never in the smallest degree mastered the dialect of Burnhead, and was quite unconscious that Jamie's remarks were other than of the most friendly description. He regarded his gyrations with some surprise, but did not realize any offensive intention. Presently, however, Jamie began to stagger about the road like a drunken man, at the same time chanting raucously:

"Oxfordy, Oxfordy, Oxfordy sumph!
What'll ye get from a soo but a grumph?

Then it was that Montagu felt a little tremor in his guardian's hand, and looking up, saw that his face was lined and drawn as with pain.

Now, Mr. Wycherly was well aware that Jamie Brown could not by any possibility know of his past weakness through personal knowledge, for his "foible" had ceased to be a foible long before Jamie was born. Yet was it pain inexpressible that his old frailty could be made an instrument of persecution for Montagu. The love and admiration of the two little boys, who had come so unexpectedly and beneficently into his life, were very precious to him, and that anything could be done or said to lower him in their estimation or hurt them through his past infirmity was little short of torture. Montagu, who couldn't imagine why Jamie was reeling about the road in that idiotic fashion, understood well enough the insulting couplet, and saw that Mr. Wycherly was pained.

"I can't stand this any more," he said, dragging his hand from his guardian's. "He's got to stop it."

He ran forward, and with a bound leapt upon Jamie from behind, who, taken by surprise, went down, with Montagu on the top of him. Over and over in the mud the boys rolled, kicking, scratching, thumping—doing everything, in fact, of a combative nature except bite.

Mr. Wycherly remained where he was, watching them. Mause would fain have hurled

herself into the press too, but he caught the old dog by the collar just in time, and had hard work to hold her, as she bounced and barked and choked in her efforts to get free. He did not feel called upon to interfere between the boys, for they were not ill-matched, and Jamie had assuredly been the aggressor. Presently, however, he saw that Montagu was uppermost, that he had got his adversary by the throat, and was deliberately bumping the boy's head on the ground, while he never relaxed his hold for an instant, and that Jamie was rapidly getting black in the face.

Still holding Mause, Mr. Wycherly ran forward, shouting, "Loose him, Montagu; let him go, I say. Don't you see you're throttling the boy? You'll choke him; let go, I say."

"I want to choke him," Montagu gasped, as Mr. Wycherly, still holding the struggling Mause with one hand, attempted to drag his ward off the prostrate Jamie with the other. "I want to kill him. I'd have done it, too, if you hadn't interfered."

"Nonsense," Mr. Wycherly said sharply. "Don't you know yet that you mustn't keep on hitting a man when he's down. Here, catch hold of Mause for me. Get up, boy!"

And he half lifted the recumbent Jamie, who, though somewhat limp, was beginning to assume a normal complexion.

Montagu glared at his foe like an angry terrier. "We haven't finished," he cried. "Let

me get at him to box him some more. You hold Mause again. . . . Come on!"

And Montagu, whose nose was bleeding, while one eye was rapidly disappearing in a tremendous bruise, danced up and down impatiently, in concert with the excited Mause.

But Jamie was holding his neck and gasping.

"I'll no fecht nae mair wi' yon wee teeger," he said slowly. "He's gey an' spunkie," he added, "for all he's sae genty and mim. Ma certie! his hauns can tak a grup although they're sae wee."

"There, you see," said Mr. Wycherly, "he says that he has had enough, so of course you can't go on any more. Now you must shake hands with each other, for it's all over."

Frankly, and with no sort of grudge, Jamie held out his square brown fist.

"I'll no ca' ye a puggie onny mair," he said handsomely.

Montagu was still eyeing his late foe with some hostility; but as his guardian had bidden him to shake hands he felt it must be the proper thing to do, so he held out his hand.

"Perhaps," he said hopefully, "you'll fight with me again some day."

"Ah'm no sae shure," Jamie replied cautiously, and in another minute was speeding on his swift bare feet towards his mother's cottage.

Montagu, still standing in the middle of the road, was indeed a deplorable figure: covered from head to foot with mud and blood, with a

singing in his ears, and an extremely sore eye, he looked about as disreputable an object as could be imagined. Mr. Wycherly stood back and regarded him curiously. "We must go home," he said, "and it is to be hoped that we shall not meet many people on the way. Here's a handkerchief; just try and mop that unfortunate nose of yours. What Miss Esperance will say, my dear Montagu, I really cannot imagine."

They turned homewards, and had not gone many yards when they met the Miss Moffats, who stopped, holding up their hands in horror at Montagu's appearance.

Mr. Wycherly had never yet spoken to them, and would fain have passed them now with a courteous salutation. But it was not to be. They closed in upon him and Montagu, both asking at once what dreadful mishap had occurred.

Mr. Wycherly again lifted his hat. "The fact is," he said, "Montagu has been engaged in the rough and tumble. There has been a great deal of tumble and a fair amount of rough. But no serious damage has been done. I think, however, that the sooner he gets home and changes the better." And yet again lifting his hat and holding out his hand to Montagu he prepared to go on his way.

But the Miss Moffats were not satisfied. "And you let him fight?" Miss Maggie exclaimed reproachfully. "Oh, sir, do you think it was right?"

"Yes, madam," Mr. Wycherly answered boldly; "I think it would have been wrong to interfere."

"But you *did* interfere," Montagu exclaimed in injured tones. "I'd have killed him if you hadn't."

"Killed who?" shrieked Miss Jeanie. "But this is dreadful . . ."

"I really think," Mr. Wycherly interposed, "that we must get back at once. Good-day to you, good-day."

And seizing Montagu's hand, he fairly ran from the Miss Moffats in the direction of Remote.

Miss Esperance met them at the gate. When she caught sight of Montagu, she, too, gazed in wonder and consternation, and ran out to them, crying, "What has happened? Has he been run over? Is he badly hurt?"

"This," said Mr. Wycherly, pointing to Montagu, "is the result, my dear Miss Esperance, of a sudden manifestation of—the Bethune temperament."

Miss Esperance flushed a most beautiful pink. She stooped and kissed her great-nephew's most uninviting-looking countenance.

"He has been fighting," she said quietly, "and I fear he has had the worst of it."

"That I didn't," the belligerent one exclaimed joyously. "I'd have killed him quite dead if Guardie hadn't stopped me. He wouldn't let me."

"Who was it?" Miss Esperance asked with breathless interest.

"Jamie Brown; he was rude. His father makes wheels and things, you know."

"Come and get cleaned, my dear, dear boy. It's very wrong to fight, but sometimes—in a good cause, it may be necessary. Come away in."

And Miss Esperance walked up the garden-path with her arm round Montagu's neck.

Presently she tapped at Mr. Wycherly's door. When she came in her gentle face was wreathed with smiles.

"I've just come to confess to you," she said, "that I feel you were right and I was wrong last night. There is no doubt whatever that Montagu is a real Bethune. In 1657 Archibald Bethune did with his own hands choke to death an Irish wrestler who had set upon him in a lonely inn in Forfarshire. The man was seven feet high, so the old chronicle says; I've just been looking."

"Won't you sit down, Miss Esperance?"

"No, I thank you, not now. I have several things to see to; but, dear friend, I felt that I must tell you that I recognize that your insight is deeper than mine. Montagu is a true Bethune; he will be a man of his hands even as the rest of our house."

"For my part," Mr. Wycherly said dryly, "I would rather fall into the hands of Edmund than those of Montagu when he is roused. Especially as it would appear to be an agree-

able characteristic of the Bethunes to throttle their adversaries."

"We have always been a fighting race," Miss Esperance remarked complacently, and departed with pride in her port and satisfaction writ large upon her face.

Mr. Wycherly looked thoughtful. "And she the gentlest and tenderest of women!" he murmured. "How strange they are!"

That afternoon the Miss Moffats called to ask after Montagu. They found him resting with a bandaged eye upon the sofa in his aunt's parlour, with Flaxman's Theogony open on his knees for his amusement. His head ached badly, but he was quite happy. He knew that in some way this exploit, although it entailed much destruction to garments, and was altogether of an unlawful and unusual order, had not really grieved his aunt. She had lectured him gently, it is true, but she had been very kind as well, and had given him a whole bunch of raisins to console him when he was left at home—his appearance being unsuited just then to polite society—and she and Edmund drove over to see Lady Alicia.

Miss Maggie came and sat down beside his sofa, and after sundry searching inquiries after his various wounds she divulged the real reason of her visit.

"I felt, my dear," said kind Miss Maggie, "that I must come and tell you a wee story I read just the other day in 'Wise Words.'"

"Thank you very much," Montagu said politely.

"It was told by a Quaker gentleman——"

"What's a Quaker, please?" Montagu interrupted.

"A very good man——"

"Are there many of them, or only one?"

"I think there must be a good many; but that doesn't matter," Miss Maggie said hastily, rather flurried by these interruptions.

"I like to understand things as I go along. Guardie says you must never pass a word you don't understand. Yes; a Quaker gentleman, a very good man. What next?"

"Well, this Quaker gentleman had a class for boys—a Sunday class——"

"Was he a minister as well as a Quaker?" asked the incorrigible Montagu.

"No, no; he just taught them for kindness; and he was much pleased because one day he asked his class whether they would rather kill a man or be killed themselves, and all of them with one accord—every single boy—said he'd rather be killed himself than take the life of a fellow-creature."

Miss Maggie paused, and looked at Montagu for admiration of these noble sentiments.

He shook his head vigorously. "I'm not like that," he said decidedly. "Why, I'd rather kill ten men than be killed myself; and I'd try to do it, too, first."

CHAPTER XVI

THE COMING OF THE COLONEL

"Soldier, soldier, home from the wars."

At Remote a box hedge separated the path leading to the back-door from the trim front-garden, sacred to visitors. Edmund often played behind that hedge. It made good cover for tiger-shooting and such-like thrilling sport, and on this particular day he was in pursuit of a bear—a brown bear of terrific size and grizzliness.

It was a very still morning. Elsa and Robina were busy at the back hanging out clothes to dry. Mr. Wycherly and Montagu were, as usual, engaged in the study of Greek or Latin in the room upstairs. Miss Esperance had gone to see a sick woman in the village, and Mr. Gloag was away on a holiday; therefore was Edmund free to amuse himself as best he could, provided he did not stir beyond the garden.

He was getting a little tired of his solitary pursuit of big game when he heard a horse's hoofs ringing sharply on the road, accompanied

by a quite unfamiliar jingling. Both hoofs and jingling stopped at the green gate, and Edmund, peering through a hole in the hedge, saw a soldier—a most resplendent soldier—in dark blue uniform and a brass helmet with a white plume, dismount from a big black horse and push open the green gate, where he paused and whistled.

He was a tall man with a brown, good-humoured face, and he waited evidently in the hope that someone would hear his whistle and come.

But no one came. Mr. Wycherly generally shut the window that looked out to the front as a preventive of interruptions.

The soldier whistled again loud and clear; then he began to sing a little song. He was evidently a patient man, and didn't mind waiting. Edmund, his round face glued to the hole in the hedge, watched him with absorbed interest, noting carefully both words and tune of the song.

The soldier sang, not at all loudly, but quite distinctly, and with a certain rollicking joviality that the child found most fascinating. Finally he opened the green gate and led his horse up the garden path to the front-door, where he rang the bell.

Still no one came, and Edmund, greatly excited, darted out into the road and in at the gate, till he, too, stood beside the waiting soldier.

"Good-morning, sir," said the soldier; "I've got a note here for Miss Bethune from the Colonel. This 'ere 'ouse is Remote, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir," Edmund answered with solemn politeness; "but who's the Colonel?"

"Colonel Dundas, sir. Can you take the note, sir? I was to wait for an answer, but I can't seem to make anybody hear," and the soldier held out a square white envelope to Edmund.

"I'll put it on the table inside," Edmund said. "My aunt is out; but please don't go away yet—I'd like to talk to you. Have you had a battle lately? And did you kill many enemies? And what are you? Are you a general or a major?"

The soldier laughed. "Well, sir, no; I ain't got that rank yet—I'm an orderly, sir."

"What's that?" asked Edmund.

"A private soldier, sir. Would you like a ride, little gentleman? I'll lift you up, and you can sit on the 'orse's back, and I'll lead 'im down to the gate and a little way down the road, if you like, sir."

"You *are* a kind man," said Edmund gratefully. "I should like that so much."

And in what the soldier would have called a "brace of shakes" Edmund was seated on the back of the tall black charger, and was riding down the path to the green gate.

Out into the road did he go and down the village street, till they reached the corner

where the highway leads to Edinburgh. There the soldier lifted him off, swung himself up into the saddle, and they parted with mutual expressions of esteem.

Edmund trotted back to the house. No one had missed him. Miss Esperance had not yet returned, and the square white envelope still lay on the hall table unopened.

That day at dinner the little boys learned from their aunt that the Colonel of the cavalry regiment just come to Jock's lodge was an old friend of hers, and was coming out to tea with them on the following day. They talked and thought of nothing else till bedtime. Next morning Edmund, still at a loose end, got tired of playing in the garden by himself, and invaded his aunt in her parlour, where she was busy mending Montagu's stockings.

He fidgeted round about Miss Esperance, dropping balls of wool and pricking his fingers with darning needles, finally upsetting a large box of pins, which his aunt commanded him to pick up and replace. This he did, and lightened his labours by suddenly bursting into song:

> "Oh, there's not a king is so gay as me . . .
> With my glass in my hand and my wench
> on my knee,
> When I gets back to the old countrie,
> And the regiment's home again."

Edmund had a clear loud voice, and could sing any tune on earth after he had heard it once.

Miss Esperance dropped the stocking she

was darning, and exclaimed in horrified tones: "Edmund, my dear boy! Where in the world did you learn that song? *Never* let me hear it again."

"The soldier gentleman what brought the Colonel's letter was singing it that morning he came, and nobody answered the door to him. He waited ever so long. What's wrong with it, Aunt Esperance? D'you not like it?"

"*Like* it?" Miss Esperance repeated; "it's a shocking, low song, and quite unsuitable for the lips of a little boy."

"What's unshootable?" demanded the volatile Edmund, quite unabashed.

Miss Esperance was busy re-threading the darning-needle Edmund's surprising ditty had caused her to drop, and she did not reply at once.

"What's unshootable?" Edmund demanded again.

"Unsuitable," Miss Esperance corrected.

"Well, 'shootable' or 'sootable,' whichever it is; what does it mean, Aunt Esperance?"

"It means not fitting."

"Like my top-coat that's got too wee?"

"No, Edmund, I did not, in this case, refer to bodily things."

"Like boots, then?" Edmund persisted, his head on one side like an inquisitive sparrow's.

Miss Esperance detached her mind from her darning. "What I meant was," she said seriously, "that a vulgar and ugly song is distressing

enough upon anybody's lips, but, above all, upon the lips of a child."

"I don't sing with my lips," Edmund objected. "What's a wench, Aunt Esperance?"

"A wench is a young woman," Miss Esperance reluctantly explained.

"Hooo!" Edmund cried scornfully, "I thought it was armour of some sort. I don't think I'd be very gay with a young woman on my knee — if she was as heavy as Robina, anyway."

"Hush, Edmund! I will not have you discuss that odious song any more. Forget it as quickly as you can; and I shall have to speak to Colonel Dundas about allowing his men to sing such songs before you."

"He didn't know I was there," Edmund said loyally; "he was the very nicest man, and Elsa never answered the door. It's such a nice tune, too," he added regretfully.

Miss Esperance made no answer. Her busy needle flew in and out of the stocking, and she appeared absorbed in her beautiful darning.

Edmund had picked up all the pins, and he fidgeted about in silence for a minute more, till he observed thoughtfully:

"So shootable's a vulgar song?"

"Child, you do nothing but misunderstand me to-day. I never said the song was suitable; I said it was *un*suitable, which means inappropriate, and, in this case, improper."

"Were you ever a wench, Aunt Esperance?"

"Certainly not!" Miss Esperance answered with considerable heat.

"But you was a young woman once, Aunt Esperance."

"That word, Edmund, is never applied to well-bred women at any time of life. It is not in itself a term of reproach, but it refers generally to——" Miss Esperance paused.

"What's it refer to?"

"Well—to women of the less refined classes. It is a South of England word, somewhat equivalent to our 'lassie.'"

"Which is the less refined classes, Aunt Esperance? Is they in a school?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! you do nothing but ask questions to-day," Miss Esperance sighed. "Still, it is right you should understand. The less refined classes, Edmund, are such as have not had many advantages in the way of education or upbringing. Excellent persons often——"

"Perhaps yon wench was an excellent person," Edmund suggested hopefully.

Miss Esperance showed no inclination to discuss the possible merits of this young woman, and Edmund continued: "Had you many advantages, Aunt Esperance?"

"Certainly I had."

"Then you was never a wench?"

"Never!"

"Why should he like a wench to sit on his knee, Aunt Esperance? She'd be very hot and heavy."

"I really must refuse to discuss that song any more. Forget it as soon as you can, and never, never sing it again."

"He was such a nice man," Edmund persisted. "He had such a beautiful helmet."

"Perhaps," said Miss Esperance, "if you are both good boys I'll take you over one day to Pier's Hill to see the soldiers being drilled." And in this entrancing prospect Edmund forgot all about the "unsuitable" song.

"Aunt Esperance, would like you should come to tea with us this afternoon, Guardie dear."

It was Montagu who spoke. Lessons were over, but he had sought Mr. Wycherly again to deliver this message.

"It is most kind of Miss Esperance," said Mr. Wycherly. "I shall, of course, be delighted and highly honoured. But why am I to have this treat to-day? Is it a birthday? No . . . I know it isn't a birthday . . ."

"Colonel Dundas is coming. He knew my daddie, and he knew my grandfather, and Aunt Esp'ance is very anxious he should see you. She said so."

"Don't you think," Mr. Wycherly said nervously, "that I might be a little in the way? If Colonel Dundas is such an old friend, they will have many things to talk over. Wouldn't it be better for me to come some other time?"

"No, it wouldn't; I'm sure it wouldn't. Aunt

Esperance says that she most pertikler wants Colonel Dundas to see *you*. Do you think he'll be able to sing, Guardie dear?"

"To sing," Mr. Wycherly repeated. "Why should he sing at tea-time?"

"Well, the soldier Edmund saw, that gave him the ride—I wish I'd been there. I did hear something, but I thought it was just a butcher, perhaps—*he* could sing beautifully; Edmund said so. I thought perhaps all soldiers can sing."

"Perhaps they can," said Mr. Wycherly. "I really don't know. You can ask him when he comes; but not at tea-time, mind; that wouldn't be polite. It seems to me, Montagu, that as Colonel Dundas is coming, we might ask him if there is any sergeant in his regiment who would teach you to box—properly. No choking, you know, or anything of that sort. You must learn to keep your temper when you fight."

"But, Guardie dear, I should never want to fight at all, if I kept my temper, It's when I'm angry I want to fight. What's the good of fighting with someone you're perfectly pleased with?"

"You won't feel perfectly pleased when you've been cuffed about the head pretty hard, but you must behave as if you were; that's where the good training comes in. No one can box properly who is in a rage. It would be good for you to learn."

"Will Edmund learn?"

"Certainly, if you do; but he needs it less than you."

Montagu felt rather aggrieved. His guardian's approval was very dear to him, and Mr. Wycherly had never even indirectly referred to his encounter with Jamie Brown until this moment. The little boy did not enjoy the cold water thus thrown upon his exploit. He had felt more or less of a hero ever since, and here was Mr. Wycherly suggesting that he should be taught to "fight properly," and that he needed such tuition much more than Edmund, who was not nearly so well behaved in general as he. Montagu was puzzled. But he was accustomed to take most things that his guardian said wholly upon trust, and, being really humble-minded, he came to the sorrowful conclusion that in some way he had not acquitted himself quite perfectly in his battle with Jamie Brown.

He was, however, dreadfully puzzled why anyone should care to fight for the mere pleasure of fighting, and that his guardian, most gentle and peace-loving of men, should suggest such an unpleasing occupation as being both necessary and beneficial was quite incomprehensible. The coming of the Colonel was shorn of some of its splendour of anticipation in consequence.

At last tea-time arrived, and with it the Colonel. He, too, rode over, but, to the great

disappointment of the little boys, he was not in uniform, as they had expected. It is true he wore beautiful breeches and gaiters, but he hadn't a weapon of any kind except a crop; nor did he wear a helmet, which grieved Edmund unspeakably.

All the same, he was a kind and jolly gentleman. He had known Admiral Bethune and Miss Esperance when he was young, and, like the honest soldier he was, did not forget people who had been kind to him. He had also been friendly with poor Archie Bethune, and was interested in seeing his little sons; and there was also just a spice of curiosity in his visit. He had heard of Mr. Wycherly, of the curious charge undertaken by Miss Esperance, of the way that charge had, in his turn, undertaken the joint guardianship of her great-nephews.

What did the Colonel expect to see?

It would be hard to define. He had formed a hazy conception of some weak-minded man: amiable, incompetent, wholly lacking in those manly attributes that the Colonel considered essential. He wondered greatly what sort of training these little boys could have with such strange protectors: an old lady—a delightful old lady Colonel Dundas would have been the first to grant—and this eccentric, ineffectual recluse, who was known to have made such a hopeless fiasco of his own life.

As he rode over to Remote the Colonel shook his head sorrowfully from time to time,

while he murmured to himself, "Poor little chaps!"

Not until they were all seated at the tea-table, and Robina rang the bell outside, did Mr. Wycherly come down.

As he came into the room the Colonel looked a little startled. He rose and shook hands cordially, and then proceeded to readjust his ideas. This was not at all what he had expected. A handsome man himself, he was quite ready to recognize good looks, and, above all, distinction in another man; and Mr. Wycherly's was, even by the Colonel's standard, a striking personality.

It is impossible to dream perpetually when your companions for many hours out of each day are two exceedingly lively small boys with inquiring minds. Mr. Wycherly's expression had lost much of its vagueness, and although it was still a great effort for him to brace himself to meet strangers, he did it for the sake of the little boys and Miss Esperance. He did not want them to feel he was in any way singular. What other people felt was a matter of the greatest indifference to him, and this gave his manner a certain poise and confidence that had been wholly wanting during his first years at Remote.

All the time during tea, while Colonel Dundas was consuming quantities of Elsa's thrice-excellent scones, and conversing pleasantly with his hosts, something in the back

of his brain kept reiterating, "I've been confoundedly misinformed about this man," and he found himself mentally accusing vague rumour of a pack of lies—"making me think the fellow a sort of village idiot, while all the time he's a scholar and a gentleman. I'd like to know who was responsible for it in the first place."

After tea the Colonel asked if he might smoke a cigar in the garden, when it was found to be raining.

No one had ever smoked at Remote, and Mr. Wycherly felt rather nervous in offering his room for that purpose. But Miss Esperance pressed the Colonel to go and have his smoke there, and sent him up alone with Mr. Wycherly, while she, greatly to their indignation, detained the little boys with her.

"You'll come down and have a chat with us when you've finished your smoke, Malcolm?" she said cheerfully. So it came about that Mr. Wycherly actually entertained a man of about his own age and social standing in his room at Remote.

They seemed to have plenty to say, and the Colonel's big, jolly laugh rang out from time to time.

When he came down he took a small boy on each knee and poked fun at them, till finally, out of a perfect farrago of nonsense, they elucidated the fact that they were to go over to Pier's Hill twice a week to be drilled and instructed in the noble art of self-defence, and

that the Colonel would himself write to London that very night for the two smallest pairs of boxing-gloves made.

"Did Guardie ask you about it?" Montagu inquired anxiously.

"Will my soldier teach us?" Edmund demanded at the same instant.

"Who will take us?" both asked at once; and before the Colonel could disentangle the questions his horse was brought round by a lad engaged for the purpose that very afternoon; and the weather was discovered to be perfectly fine.

The whole family turned out to see him mount and ride off, for Montagu had rushed upstairs to fetch Mr. Wycherly, that he might not miss this entrancing spectacle.

The Colonel, as he reached the corner, looked back at the little group standing by the green gate and waved his hat to them, and for just a minute after the landscape seemed a little blurred.

"There are more ways than one of making men," he said to a brother officer at mess that night. "It's the quaintest household, but upon my soul I'm not at all sure that those two capital little chaps are not rather to be envied."

The Colonel was not familiar with the writings of a certain monk of Flanders, or he might have remembered that it is love alone that "maketh light all that is burthensome, and equally bears all that is unequal."

CHAPTER XVII

MR. WYCHERLY GOES INTO SOCIETY

"Where is the man who has the power and skill
To stem the torrent of a woman's will?"

WHILE Mr. Gloag was away upon his holiday a strange minister and his wife came to look after the congregation at Burnhead. The inhabitants regarded them with more or less suspicion, for they came from a big town, and their ways were unaccustomed.

Mr. Dewar, the visiting minister, was mild and inoffensive, with no strongly marked characteristic of any sort; but Mrs. Dewar, a large, bustling lady of resolute character and little tact, succeeded during her first week in offending the majority of the leading members of the congregation.

Lady Alicia frankly avowed that "she couldn't endure the woman"; Miss Esperance said nothing; the Miss Moffats were encouraged by Lady Alicia's plain speaking to go so far as to remark that Mrs. Dewar was very different from "our late dear Mrs. Gloag"; while the village women, in confabulation at their re-

spective doors, pronounced the new-comer to be "a leddy-buddy," which to the initiated subtly conveyed their opinion that she was not quite a lady.

Still, she was eager to do her duty in this small benighted backwater, and she "visited" with zeal and frequency.

Her second visit to Remote was paid at a time when Mr. Wycherly happened to have gone downstairs to ask Miss Esperance a question, and Mrs. Dewar was shown into the parlour before he could escape; and even had such flight been possible, Miss Esperance held up a small, imploring hand as Robina announced the lady's name which would have kept Mr. Wycherly at her side to face the wives of twenty ministers.

Mrs. Dewar was charmed. She had wanted all along to meet Mr. Wycherly, and she opened the conversation at once by shaking a large, kid-gloved forefinger at him, remarking with ponderous jocosity:

"I didn't see *you* in the church last Sabbath; and how was that?"

Mr. Wycherly glanced despairingly at Miss Esperance, and she came to the rescue by remarking:

"Mr. Wycherly is not a member of our Church, Mrs. Dewar; he is an Episcopalian."

"Ah, but nevertheless," Mrs. Dewar persisted, "I think he should come and hear Mr. Dewar preach while he has the opportunity.

It isn't often at a little place like this you get a man from such an important charge."

"I am sure Burnhead is very fortunate," murmured the ever-courteous Mr. Wycherly.

"You may well say that," the lady replied, highly satisfied; "and I must say that the place seems to me to be in great need of a little moral and intellectual quickening. Of course, poor Mr. Gloag has been much handicapped in his work by that poor invalid wife of his."

Miss Esperance always sat up very straight in her chair, but during Mrs. Dewar's speech her little figure attained to a positively awe-inspiring frigidity of displeasure, and Mr. Wycherly looked anxiously at their visitor as though he feared she might be turned into a pillar of salt there and then.

"On the contrary," Miss Esperance remarked, and her very voice seemed to have withdrawn itself to some inaccessible altitude, "by the death of his wife dear Mr. Gloag has been deprived of such a perfect helpmeet as is seldom given to man. You must certainly have been strangely misinformed, Mrs. Dewar, to have acquired such a very mistaken conception of the true circumstances."

For a moment Mr. Wycherly felt almost sorry for Mrs. Dewar; but although she could not fail to be conscious that she had, in vulgar phrase, "put her foot in it," she was too thick-skinned and complacent to be crushed.

"I'm sure," she said, making an effort to

speak pleasantly—"I'm very glad to hear what you say; but really there does seem to be a sad lack of what my husband calls Spiritual Freemasonry among the congregation here, and naturally one judges more or less of the Shepherd by his sheep."

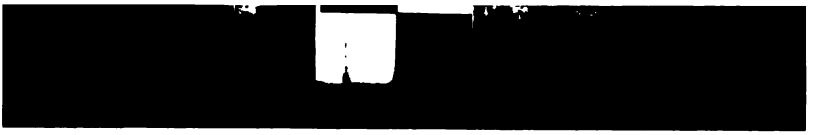
"I fear," said Miss Esperance, "that it is exceedingly unsafe to do so in the majority of cases, including, surely, the fundamental Example from which your analogy is drawn."

There was a dreadful pause. Poor Mr. Wycherly was hot all over. "If they are going to talk theology," he thought to himself desperately, "I shall be compelled to escape by the window."

"You must, Mrs. Dewar," he exclaimed recklessly, and then coloured furiously, for his voice sounded so loud—"you must find it very agreeable to pass a week or two in the country at this time of year."

"We always go to the country every year," Mrs. Dewar rejoined rather huffily, "but generally to the sea; it is so much better for the children. We came here this year solely to oblige Mr. Gloag;" and the many bugles on Mrs. Dewar's stiff mantle chimed in concert, as though in approbation of this amiability.

"That was very good of you," said Mr. Wycherly. "I am sure he badly needed a holiday; I don't think he has been out of the village for more than a night or two for over ten years."



"That's where he makes a great mistake. My husband always says that a man grows stagnant unless he gets frequent change of scene and society. What you tell me explains much of the spiritual torpor we deplore in this village."

"I don't know what you would say to me, Mrs. Dewar; I should be afraid to confess to you how many years it is since I have been out of this village—a great many, I assure you."

"Doubtless you are engaged in various intellectual pursuits which help to pass the time," Mrs. Dewar remarked graciously; and she smiled upon Mr. Wycherly—all women did when they got the chance—and during the rest of her somewhat prolonged visit she addressed her remarks almost exclusively to him, ignoring Miss Esperance, who sat still and straight in her high-backed chair with a look of considerable amusement in her kind old eyes.

Mr. Wycherly accompanied Mrs. Dewar to the gate, and held it open for her to pass out.

"You must come and see us at the Manse," she remarked condescendingly; then confidentially: "I fear you must find it sadly lonely and uncongenial living here with only that old lady for company."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Wycherly, "most people are only too inclined to envy me the great, the very great, privileges that I enjoy."

And Mrs. Dewar had to learn that it was not

only Miss Esperance who could surround herself with an atmosphere of almost unapproachable aloofness. She concluded her farewell with some haste, and Mr. Wycherly walked slowly back to the house.

Montagu met him in the doorway.

"Who was that lady, Guardie?" he inquired eagerly. "She stayed an awful time. Who is she?"

"God made her, and therefore let her pass for a woman," said Mr. Wycherly dreamily.

Montagu stared at him in astonishment, then pursued him indoors to find out exactly what he meant by this cryptic speech; but for once Mr. Wycherly's explanations were both elusive and unsatisfactory.

Next day Miss Esperance invaded Mr. Wycherly's room right in the middle of lessons. She held an open note in her hand—a note written on pink paper with scalloped edges. "I am sorry to interrupt you," she said, "but here is an invitation from Miss Maggie Moffat asking us both to take tea with them on Friday at five. May I accept for you?"

Mr. Wycherly, who had risen at her entrance, was standing behind his loaded desk.

"Oh, dear Miss Esperance, pray don't!" he exclaimed piteously; "you know I never go out anywhere—and to a tea-party. . . . I shouldn't know how to behave. Pray thank the Miss Moffats, and say that I never go anywhere . . . it is most kind of them . . . but . . ."

"I'd go if I were you," Montagu suggested, sprawling over his table and sucking the handle of his pen; "they have awfully good sorts of cakes, full of squashy stuff that runs out over your fingers. My! but it is good."

"If it required anything to confirm me in my refusal," Mr. Wycherly said, smiling at Miss Esperance, "such perilous cakes as those Montagu describes would do it."

"It would please them very much if you would go," Miss Esperance said persuasively; "we shouldn't stay more than an hour."

Mr. Wycherly wrinkled up his forehead in the greatest perplexity. "But I never go anywhere," he said again.

"And why not?" Miss Esperance asked boldly. "If it were almost anybody else I would not press you, but they are so sensitive. If you don't go they will think it is because you are proud, and don't think them good enough."

"Me! Proud!" ejaculated poor Mr. Wycherly. "But this is dreadful."

"They stopped us one day," remarked the pen-sucking Montagu, "and asked if you were not very stand-off, and Edmund said it was bosh, and you were nothing of the sort, and that if they just came and played handy-pandy with you they'd soon see."

"Well," said Miss Esperance, tapping the letter, "what am I to say?"

"Oh, say Guardie's much obliged, and he'll

be very pleased to come, and that I will be very pleased to come too," suggested Montagu, who appreciated tea at the Miss Moffats'.

"I did not ask you, Montagu," Miss Esperance remarked with dignity. "Well, dear friend, may I say you will go with me?"

"Do you *wish* me to go, Miss Esperance?" groaned Mr. Wycherly.

"I don't wish you to do anything intensely disagreeable to yourself, but if you did go it would assuredly give great pleasure to them . . . and to me."

"Then I will go," said Mr. Wycherly, and he said it with all the resolution of a man determined to do or die.

The Miss Moffats were greatly flustered, for Mr. and Mrs. Dewar were also to be of the party, and to entertain two gentlemen at once was an unheard-of plunge into the wildest dissipation.

They paid innumerable visits of inspection to their little dining-room, where the tea-table, laid early in the afternoon, positively groaned under its load of dainties. No less than four different kinds of jam gleamed jewel-like, each in a cut-glass dish, at the four corners of the table; while cookies, soda scones, dropped scones, shortbread, and the cream cakes so appreciated by Montagu, were piled up in abundance on the various plates. In the centre of the table was a large épergne arranged with flowers by Miss Jeanie's artistic hands. These

preparations all completed, there yet remained the arrangement of the guests at table.

"You see, me dear," said Miss Maggie anxiously, "we must ask Mr. Dewar to take the foot of the table because he's the minister, and will ask the blessing; but the question is, Where'll we put Mr. Wycherly? Because, you see, whoever sits by Mr. Wycherly will get a gentleman on either side, which doesn't seem quite fair somehow. If we put him on my right hand, and give him Mrs. Dewar for a partner, then she'll be seated next her husband, and that doesn't seem quite correct; and yet, if we put Miss Esperance Bethune there, that's not right either, and her seeing him every day."

"Don't you think," Miss Jeanie suggested, "that he'd better sit on your right hand and Mrs. Dewar on your left, with Miss Bethune between Mr. and Mrs. Dewar, and I'll separate the gentlemen?"

"We mustn't think of ourselves on occasions like these," Miss Maggie said, with just a tinge of reproof in her voice; "it's not a matter to be settled hastily."

"Well, there's not many ways we *can* sit unless you give up having Mr. Dewar at the bottom of the table," Miss Jeanie responded sharply.

"That," Miss Maggie replied solemnly, "is a necessity—because of the blessing."

So after all Miss Jeanie had it her way.

Mr. Wycherly had assuredly never been at a similar tea-party

At the very beginning of the meal his polite commonplaces to Miss Maggie were drowned by the minister's voice, as with uplifted hand he asked a lengthy blessing. Mr. Wycherly was rather startled, but he bent his head decorously, and when it was over continued his sentence where he had broken off.

Mrs. Dewar was so odiously patronizing to the Miss Moffats that Mr. Wycherly unconsciously ranged himself on their side, devoting himself to the entertainment of Miss Maggie, so that she became hopelessly flustered, and forgot to ask Mrs. Dewar if she would take some more tea—an omission pointed out by the neglected lady with some asperity.

Mr. Wycherly filled the soul of Miss Jeanie with rapture by telling her how Montagu and Edmund were consumed with envy because they were not invited. When tea was over, and they repaired to the front parlour, he looked anxiously at Miss Esperance. Surely the stipulated hour must be up. The Miss Moffats were quite endurable: kind and simple, and almost pathetic in their tremulous eagerness to please. But Mrs. Dewar was getting on his nerves, and she insisted on addressing her conversation to him, as though she were on much more familiar terms with him than the rest of the party—a dreadful supposition, not to be borne for an instant.

"Perhaps," said Miss Maggie, beaming upon her guests, "the gentlemen would like a game of draughts."

Mr. Wycherly's heart went down into his boots. Some years ago he could truthfully have said he didn't play draughts; since then, however, Mr. Gloag had taught him, that he in his turn might teach the little boys; and Mr. Wycherly was scrupulously accurate in all his statements.

Miss Esperance came to the rescue. "I fear," said she, "that we must be going. We promised the little boys that we would be home by about six."

Miss Esperance never made any plan that she did not intend to carry out, and five minutes later she and Mr. Wycherly were on their way home. The little boys were waiting for them at the gate, and volunteered to take Mr. Wycherly for a walk.

Miss Esperance stood looking after them, and her eyes were fond and proud. Old Elsa came out to ask her mistress something about the supper, and joined her at the gate; and she, too, looked after the trio marching down the road, Mr. Wycherly, as usual, in the middle, with a small boy hanging on to either hand.

"He's awfu' kind to they bairns," said Elsa. "They've wauken'd him up extraordinar'. He's no the same . . . gentleman he was afore they came."

"*He* is exactly the same, Elsa," Miss Esper-

ance said gently. "Circumstances have changed, and God in His great mercy has seen fit to call out the many beautiful qualities with which He has endowed His servant. But Mr. Wycherly is not changed."

Elsa's face softened, as it always did when she looked at her mistress.

"I'm thinkin', mem," she said, "that though the Lord has seen fit to do much, He made you his instrument."

Gradually, by slow degrees, but daily more and more, was Mr. Wycherly shaken out of his groove. It was he who took the little boys twice a week to be drilled at Pier's Hill. When Mr. Gloag came back he even went occasionally to the Manse to play chess with him because Miss Esperance declared the minister to be so lonely. And, more wonderful still, that winter he made two or three journeys to Shrewsbury to confer with Mr. Woodhouse, and see after his affairs in person, leaving Montagu in charge of Miss Esperance and the household.

CHAPTER XVIII

MONTAGU AND HIS AUNT

"In a space of shining and fragrant clarity you have a vision of marble columns and stately cities, of men august in singleheartedness and strength, and women comely and simple and superb as goddesses; and with a music of leaves and winds and waters, of plunging ships and clanging armours, of girls at song and kindly gods discoursing, the sunny-eyed heroic age is revealed in all its nobleness, in all its majesty, its candour, and its charm."—W. E. HENLEY.

IT happened that Elsa died quite suddenly while Mr. Wycherly was away upon one of these journeys, and Miss Esperance would not let him be told, lest he should—as he most assuredly would—hasten home to her assistance.

It was a very cold spring, and Miss Esperance drove into Edinburgh to make arrangements for Elsa's funeral in pouring rain and in the teeth of a cutting east wind. She caught a bad cold, but being naturally very upset at the time, and having a great deal to see to, she took but little care of herself, and was laid aside with a sharp attack of bronchitis before Robina had realized that there was anything the matter.

Robina, with the best intentions in life, was no nurse. She worried Miss Esperance; and yet that decided little lady would have no stranger in the house. So it ended in Montagu —who was then nearly twelve years old—doing everything for her, deftly, quietly, and with the gentle skill so often developed by dreamy people when they are roused to action.

During his aunt's illness, the little boy slept in a large cupboard off her bedroom; and that he might the better be able to attend to her wants through the night, and yet not entirely lose his sleep as he did during the first night he was on duty, he tied one end of a long string round his big toe and the other round his patient's wrist, and if Miss Esperance wanted the fire made up, or fresh poultices, or the "jelly drink" she was too weak to reach for herself, she would give the string a gentle pull, and Montagu, who was a light sleeper, was by her side in a moment, quick to hear her faintest whisper.

During that time Montagu learned to know his aunt as he never could have done under any other circumstances. As her breathing grew easier, and her wonderful constitution—result of a life temperate and self-denying in all things—reasserted itself, they would have long and intimate talks, and the little boy learned a great deal about "the family" of which Miss Esperance was very proud. It had been settled that at Mr. Wycherly's death Montagu was to

take his name. "He has no son, my dear, and he has done so much for us that we could not refuse him this; but I would have you remember always that you are a Bethune. There have been some bad men among them and many good; but, bad and good alike, they have all been Scottish gentlemen. You will be educated in England, Montagu; you will go to the English Church, and you will learn English ways—good and pleasant ways they are, which go to the making of such men as our dear friend—so wise and kind and unselfish. But never forget that you yourself are a Bethune, for it is a proud name to bear."

And then the dear old lady would show him the family's coat-of-arms in a little fat square calf-bound "Scots Compendium: or, Rudiments of Honour. Containing the succession of Scots Kings from Fergus, who founded the Monarchy. Also the Nobility of Scotland, Present and Extinct. The fifth edition improved and brought down to the year 1752."

From this work Montagu would read aloud to his aunt, almost as often as from the Bible itself, and would shudder as he read how one Archibald Bethune was "famish'd at Falkland in the year 1592 so that he nearly dy'd," but, escaping to France, "did afterwards marry one Esperance de Lanois, daughter of a Marshal of France——" "And since then," Miss Esperance would interrupt eagerly, "there was never another Esperance Bethune till I was born."

"I think she must have been like you," Montagu said, "kind to him because he was so thin from being famish'd."

Miss Esperance laughed softly. "She was a girl of sixteen, my dear, when he married her."

"I'd rather marry you than any girl of sixteen that I've ever seen," Montagu said stoutly. "You're much prettier than any of them—except, perhaps, Margaret," he added, for he was very faithful in his enthusiasms.

Indeed, there were many who would have agreed with him, if they could have seen Miss Esperance at that moment, sitting up in bed propped up with pillows, with a pink bed-jacket, not half such a dainty colour as her flushed cheeks, and the adorable white "mutch" framing the shimmering silver of her hair.

And here it must be confessed that it is just possible that Miss Esperance knew perfectly well what a pretty old lady she was; for all the other old ladies of her time wore "fronts," dreadful, aggressive, black, brown, or yellow fronts, whether they had any hair or not. To wear one's own white hair was unusual even to boldness; and yet Miss Esperance, most decorous and delicately feminine of womankind, quietly ignored this unpleasing fashion, and was beautiful even as nature had intended her to be.

Many and exciting were the Jacobite stories she told to Montagu, till his enthusiasm for the house of Stuart knew no bounds. He read

aloud gracefully and with understanding, and his reading of the Bible was a never-failing source of delight to Miss Esperance. She would lie with shining eyes and overflowing heart while the boy's voice, gravely emphatic and justly modulated, proclaimed to her the divine message to which she had ever lent so willing an ear. She even grew accustomed to the enunciation of Montagu's "extraordinary views"; as, when one day he had read to her the story of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, he said dreamily: "It's curious, isn't it, how disagreeable nearly all the women in the Bible are?"

"Oh, Montagu!" Miss Esperance exclaimed distressedly, "think of the mother of our Lord, and Mary, and Martha, and Dorcas——"

"Well, aunt," he interrupted, "you know in the Old Testament there's very few of them at all kind and nice. The Greek women were far better: look at Alcestis, and Penelope, and Polyxena! I don't like those Hebrew women at all; they were so vindictive and dishonourable. Fancy *you* behaving like Sara or Rachel or Jael!—why, even Helen was far nicer than most of them, and she wasn't considered particularly good, though she *was* so beautiful."

"Tell me about Alcestis," said Miss Esperance, lying back on her pillows and feeling unequal just then to a discussion regarding the relative merits of Hebrew and Greek women.

"I'll fetch you Guardie's Euripides," Montagu

cried eagerly, "and read it you in English as he used to read it to me. I really think, Aunt Esperance, if you'll only listen carefully you'll like it almost as well as the Bible!"

And Montagu fled from the room before his aunt's horrified expostulations reached him.

Then began a series of readings from Euripides, followed by arguments between Miss Esperance and Montagu which would have convulsed Mr. Wycherly had he been there to hear them.

Their extreme earnestness bridged over the gulf of years between them, and it must be confessed that Miss Esperance took the greatest delight in picking holes in the characters of some of Montagu's heroes.

It was quite useless for Montagu, in imitation of Mr. Wycherly's methods, to point out that such and such ideas were so deeply rooted in the national character as to be a part of it: Miss Esperance would only shake her pretty white head, exclaiming, "Na! na! my dear laddie—right is right, and wrong, wrong, and that man Admetus was just no better than a coward: grumbling at his parents, forsooth, because they wouldn't die in his place: accepting his wife's sacrifice, and then blaming those poor old people. Oh, I've no patience with him, a poor-spirited creature—no man he!"

In spite, however, of the shortcomings in the character of Admetus, the most human of the Greek dramatists certainly attracted Miss

Esperance. She inquired in a detached and impersonal manner whether there was not a printed translation of "Ion" in the house, and looked distinctly disappointed when Montagu informed her that there was no such thing. She had perforce to leave the characters in no matter what *impasse* when Montagu stopped reading, as he would occasionally for very mischief, at the most exciting place—just for the pleasure of being asked to "go on a little longer, dear laddie; I shall not sleep if I don't know for certain whether that poor body Kreusa knew that fine young man Ion for her son or no."

But directly afterwards her conscience smote her, and she herself stopped Montagu: fearing that, entertaining as these plays undoubtedly were, they were apt, perhaps, to distract her mind from higher things; and she bade him take Euripides back to Mr. Wycherly's room, and bring her Jeremy Taylor instead, when Montagu would read "The Remedies against Wandering Thoughts," "The Remedies of Temptations Proper to Sickness," or "General Exercises Preparatory to Death."

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOND ADVENTURE

" But warily tent, when ye come to court me,
And come na unless the back-yett be ajee.'
Old Song.

Miss Esperance was decidedly better, and she had at last allowed Montagu to tell Mr. Wycherly of old Elsa's sudden death, and also of her own illness. The letter put it, according to her instructions, that she had been " rather ailing," and this guarded statement produced a telegram from Mr. Wycherly announcing his return next day.

Therefore the little household was commanded to retire especially early; and by half-past eight that night every light in Remote, save that of the fires, was extinguished; and the whole family were, as Robina would have put it, " safely bedded."

Miss Esperance had that evening insisted that Montagu should return to the bedroom he shared with Edmund, declaring that she was perfectly capable of getting anything that she wanted for herself. No one guessed how ter-

ribly Miss Esperance missed old Elsa's ministrations at every turn, for the old woman, though frail and incapable of any hard work for some time past, was yet most jealous of all personal service to her mistress, and Robina had never been permitted to do anything that brought her into direct contact with that lady.

Robina, bustling, buxom, industrious, and far handsomer at three-and-twenty than she had been at seventeen, had for a long time now entirely managed the housework; but as a personal attendant she left much to be desired. When she brought her mistress a cup of excellent beef-tea, she invariably slopped it over into the saucer, often on to the tray-cloth. She was economically minded, too, as regards laundry work (most people are when they have to do it themselves), and looked upon stains as a very minor matter in setting out a tray. It was Montagu who noticed the intense disfavour with which Miss Esperance regarded such small untidinesses: how often the nourishing dishes prepared by Robina with the utmost care were sent away untasted because they were not daintily served; and he took the matter and the trays into his own hands, with the result that things were served even as Elsa had served them, and Miss Esperance drank her beef-tea without remark.

Not that she was unobservant; she noted everything that Montagu did for her, and even when she was at her weakest and worst, she

was filled with a tender, admiring sort of amusement at the boy's deft, dainty ways of waiting upon her—ways undoubtedly acquired during his long and close association with Mr. Wycherly.

At first Robina exclaimed in horror at the enormous number of tray-cloths and dinner napkins discarded by Montagu if they had the smallest spot or stain; but Montagu pointed out that it was better to have mountains of washing than that his aunt should be starved, and the girl gave in gracefully, for she was very eager to fill Elsa's place as far as she possibly could.

There is no doubt that she thoroughly enjoyed her new dignity and independence, and she wrote to the still faithful Sandie that he might, if he was in the mind, look in and see her one evening; the mistress had said she was "perfectly willing, though still confined to her bed." Sandie was now in partnership with a butcher on the other side of Edinburgh, ten long miles from Burnhead, and the bicycle was not within everybody's reach in those days. Still, he managed every fortnight or so to get over to see Robina, for they were now formally betrothed, and their engagement was smiled upon by the authorities.

Sandie wanted to get married at once, but Robina had declared long before Elsa's death that she could not bring herself to leave Miss Esperance, and now she felt that such a course

was quite out of the question. Besides, she was in no hurry to get married. That she could get married, and well married, whenever she liked, was a matter for complacent reflection, but otherwise she was very contented with things as they were.

Sandie was hardly so satisfied. If not exactly an ardent lover, he had assuredly proved himself a very faithful one, and he ruled his life largely by the somewhat strict conceptions of Robina.

Montagu was very tired. He had had a hard fortnight, with many broken, anxious nights. The responsibility had lain heavily on his young, slender shoulders. He was supremely thankful that Mr. Wycherly would be home on the morrow. It was pleasant to lie once more in his big four-post bed instead of in the somewhat cramped and stuffy cupboard where he had spent his nights lately. He stretched himself luxuriously, and turned and turned that he might find the absolutely comfortable position in which to fall asleep. But somehow sleep would not come. Every smallest sound disturbed him. Whenever a little piece of cinder fell into the grate from the fire in his aunt's bedroom, he started up to listen, thinking she had moved and might want him. But all was perfectly quiet.

Edmund, who preserved his infantile capacity for falling asleep directly he lay down, slumbered peacefully in the little bed beside the big one Miss Esperance slept the heavy, dreamless

sleep of old age and exhaustion. Mause, old now and very deaf, slept soundly in her kennel outside the little house, and Robina already slept the healthy sleep of hard-working youth. Only the little boy in the big bed with carved oaken posts and brocade canopy lay wide-eyed and wakeful with that dreadful, useless wakefulness that comes sometimes to the overtired. There was no moon to shine companionably through the blind; the room was in absolute black darkness, and when Montagu had been in bed about half an hour it seemed to him that it must be about the middle of the night. The casement window was wide open, but the night was so still that the blind never stirred. Again and again he sat up to listen for some sound from his aunt's room; it would have been a relief had she wanted him, but there was no sound of any kind.

Still he could not sleep, and at last his listening was rewarded, for he heard a step outside—a stealthy step that paused hesitating, then crept fumblingly forward.

There was no doubt whatever that it was a step, and Montagu, convinced that it must at least be midnight, immediately jumped to the conclusion that whoever was there could be there for no lawful purpose.

If it was a burglar he must be got away without noise. That was Montagu's first thought. On no account must Miss Esperance be wakened or alarmed.

He flew out of bed, and, squeezing in behind the dressing-table, leant out of the window. Soft, impenetrable, wet darkness met and enveloped him. A fine rain was falling, and he could see nothing, but he distinctly heard the hesitating footsteps turn and go round the house towards the front. Softly, on naked feet, he made his way to Edmund's side and shook him. But Edmund was difficult to wake, for Montagu did not dare to speak above a whisper, and it was not until he had reiterated several times, "There's someone creeping round the house; it's a thief probably," in the eeriest of whispers, that Edmund was roused.

When he did grasp the situation, however, he arose instantly, exclaiming in a joyful whisper, "Come on, and let's bash his head for him, then he can make no noise, nor break in, neither."

"That's all very well," said the more cautious Montagu, whose teeth were chattering, partly from cold and partly from fear for his aunt. "We've got to catch him first. Let's come to Guardie's room, and see if we can get a glimpse of the fellow from the window. The night's as black as pitch, though."

Very quietly Montagu lit a candle, and the two sped across the landing to Mr. Wycherly's room.

"Close the door behind you, and that'll stifle his groans," the valiant Edmund whispered as they reached their goal. "I just wish we had the villain here."

"I don't," Montagu responded gloomily. "He might jump about and make no end of a row before we got him under."

They had no sort of doubt as to their ultimate triumph over the nefarious designs of this prowling stranger, but they were unfortunately hampered by the necessity for extreme quietude.

"I expect it's the parlour he'll be wanting to break into," Edmund suggested. "All those silver cups and things on the sideboard, you know. The basket with the forks and spoons is in aunt's room. We must take care he doesn't go there. Don't let him see a light." And Edmund promptly blew out the candle that Montagu held.

Together they softly opened the window and leaned out. Neither could, of course, see anything, nor at the moment was anything to be heard. "We'll wait a wee while," Edmund whispered, and wait they did, in breathless silence, shoulder pressed to shoulder, the only sound the quick beating of their hearts.

Their patience was rewarded. The hesitating steps came slowly round to the front of the house, and paused under their very window. Then somebody gave a low whistle.

Montagu dragged Edmund back from the window. "That's to summon his confederates. What 'll we do? If there's more than one they're sure to wake Aunt Esperance and frighten her dreadfully. We must do something—quick!"

"Will I fling out the poker on the chance of hitting him?" inquired Edmund, who had already provided himself with that weapon.

"No, that won't do, for if you don't hit him, it would warn him we'd seen him. . . ."

"Perhaps it would make him run away."

"Not it! I've got it! Let's empty the ewer of water over him first. I think he's just under the window; and that's sure to startle him, and he'll jump out. Then you must say in an awful voice: 'Throw up your hands without a sound!' *You* mustn't say it loud, mind; and you'll light the candle an' show me holding one of the big pistols hanging at the stair-head. I brought one in with me."

"I don't think he'd better see you," Edmund objected; "he mightn't be a bit terrified."

"Perhaps we'd better keep the room dark, then, and mebbe he'll think it's Guardie. . . ."

"Pooh! Guardie's voice isn't a bit awful. I'll be a lot more frightening than him, I can tell you. Have you got that jug? Steady, now! Mind you don't let the ewer go too, else we'll catch it from Robina. Listen a minute first."

Again the low whistle immediately under the window.

Very carefully they balanced the heavy jug on the window-sill. "It must go all at once in one big splash," Montagu whispered. "*Now!*"

A very big splash undoubtedly followed.

A series of gasps, and the sound of a voice raised in lamentation, exclaiming: "Lord hae

mercy! What like a way's yon to greet a body? An' it that dark a' couldna' find the back door. Hoo was I tae ken ye'd a' be gane tae yer beds at nine o'clock? Ye didna' use tae be sae awfu' airly. But I'll just tell you this, Robina lass, it's the last time you'll catch me trailin' awa' over here to get sic' a cauld welcome, as though it wasna' wet eneugh onny wye. A'm din, I can tell you that."

Montagu clutched Edmund by the arm, exclaiming in horrified tones: "I do believe it's Sandie Croall;" then, leaning out of the window as far as he could reach: "Is it you, Sandie? because if so we're most awfully sorry, only please don't speak so loud, for Aunt Esperance is asleep, and she's been so ill. We thought you must be someone trying to break in. What made you come in the middle of the night?"

"It's no the middle o' the night," Sandie grunted. "The clock on the kirk tower has only just chappit nine. It happened I could get over, and I thocht I'd just look in an' see Robiny, little thinkin' I'd get sic' a like reception. I'm just drooket through an' through. What for did ye no speer wha' was there, young gentleman, an' no gae droonin' honest folk?"

"Would you like to come in and get dry?" Edmund suggested hospitably. "There's sure to be some fire in the kitchen."

"No, thank ye," Sandie replied, still somewhat huffy; "I'll gang awa' hame tae my mither, an' she'll dry my claes tae me whiles I'm in my bed."

"Shall I tell Robina you called?" Montagu asked politely.

Sandie paused. "I'm thinkin', young gentleman," he remarked severely, "that the less you said about to-night's wark the better it'll be for you. If I am content to pass the matter over with obleevion, it's the least you can dae tae dae the same."

"We're most awfully sorry," the boys said once more, in subdued chorus.

"Just you gang awa' back tae yer beds," said Sandie, and with these parting words he felt his way out to the green gate, and they heard his footsteps going pop-plop on the wet road till they died away in the distance.

Edmund sighed.

"It was a pity we couldn't bash his head or anything," he murmured regretfully. "I hope a real one 'll come some day when Aunt Esperance is well, and we don't need to be so hushified. Then we could have a jolly good mill."

Rather dispirited and extremely cold, they crept back to bed.

"I wonder," Montagu murmured thoughtfully, "why he didn't seem to want Robina to know he'd been here."

Edmund gave a smothered laugh. "My word! but he did catch his breath when we douched him; an' wasn't he cross when he thought it was Robina? I wonder if she's ever done it before. . . ."

CHAPTER XX

A QUESTION OF THEOLOGY

"Nae shauchlin' testimony here—
We were a' damned, an' that was clear;
I owned, wi' gratitude an' wonder,
He was a pleisure to sit under."

R. L. S.

THE while that Mr. Wycherly looked after Montagu's secular education Miss Esperance undertook the religious, and long, weary Sunday evenings did he spend in wrestling with the polemics of the "Shorter Catechism."

"Why shorter?" he would ask bitterly. "It's as long as ever it can be."

"There's a longer one than that, my dear son," Miss Esperance would answer cheerfully, "but you won't need to learn it unless you become a minister."

"I shall never be a minister," said Montagu firmly one day, when he had made four mistakes in the answer which defines "Effectual Calling"—an answer, by the way, which he could have learned in two minutes had he been in the slightest degree interested. "I shall never be a minister; I shall be an Epicurean when I'm

grown up. Mr. Wycherly was telling me about them yesterday, and I like them."

Miss Esperance gave a positive gasp of dismayed astonishment. "Oh, my dear," she exclaimed, "I hope that you will always be too sincere a Christian ever to dream of being anything else. I must indeed have taught you badly that any such idea should be possible."

"Oh no, dear aunt," said Montagu reassuringly, rubbing his head against her shoulder. "It's not that at all; but people do sometimes change their religion, you know, when they're grown up—like Calvin and Luther you told me about. And, you know, I really think I like the old gods best; they were very pleasant on the whole."

"Montagu, Montagu, you don't know what you are saying! Those heathen gods that you speak of never existed. There were no such beings."

"Are you *sure*, auntie?" Montagu asked earnestly. "They sound very real—quite as real, and much cheerfuller than . . . the Shorter Catechism," he concluded lamely, checked by the unfeigned horror he saw in his aunt's face.

Miss Esperance took off her spectacles and wiped them; then she put them on again, and laid her frail old hand over the square brown little hand lying on her knee, saying gently: "Montagu, dear, you are talking of what you do not understand. It will in nowise be

counted against you, *because* you do not understand; but you must not say such things, really, my dear boy, you *must* not, and it grieves me the more in that I somehow must be in fault. My teaching has in no way been blest if you are so filled with doubts already."

Poor Miss Esperance looked terribly distressed, and the little boy at her knee, who, child as he was, had realized her sweetness and her truth every day of the years he had been with her, wondered with a sorrowful vagueness what he could have said to vex her so. And inasmuch as he could find no words to express the thoughts that were in him, he flung his arms round his aunt's neck, exclaiming: "I love you, so I won't be an Epicurean if you don't want me to; but you know, dear auntie, it must have been so happy in those days—there were never any Sabbaths."

Miss Esperance held him close and prayed silently; she even forbore to dilate upon the blessed privileges of that Sabbath which, as she had just been instructing Montagu, "is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days: and spending the whole time in the public and private exercise of God's worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy."

"Is dinner a necessity or a mercy?" Montagu had asked one day, he himself being distinctly

inclined to look upon it as a mercy, for it followed morning church, and after the children came, in deference to a suggestion of Mr. Wycherly's, founded upon certain youthful reminiscences of his own, there was always dessert on Sundays.

Now it happened that on the Sunday previous to Montagu's announcement of his approaching conversion to Epicureanism, the Rev. Peter Gloag had given a lengthy and vigorous discourse on Eternal Punishment. He was a true disciple of Calvin in that he believed that the majority of mankind needed herding into the right path by the sheep-dog of sheer terror as to what would most certainly befall them should they stray from it; and he succeeded in striking dire dismay to the very soul of one small member of his congregation. The minister had also touched upon predestination and election, and Montagu, who was tender-hearted and imaginative, was suddenly panic-stricken by the idea that perhaps he and Edmund, and even Mr. Wycherly, who never came to church, might be already numbered among those whom the Rev. Peter Gloag had denounced as being "rejected, left to sin, to unbelief, and to perdition."

Long after he was put to bed in the big four-post bed, while Edmund slept peacefully in the little bed beside him, did Montagu lie awake wondering whether he would die that night. The very prayer that he said every evening at

his aunt's knee took on a new and terrible significance:

> "If I should die before I wake,
> I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take."

Montagu repeated it over and over again with dry lips, while he turned from side to side in a vain endeavour to get away from the constant beating as of a hammer upon an anvil that sounded ceaselessly in his ears.

"If I should die—" the child whispered to himself, then gradually he fell once more into thinking of his beloved Greeks; they, too, if they did not actually fear death, met it sorrowfully, for it meant leaving the bright light of the sun; and presently the reiterated "If I should die—" changed to the cry of Alcestis, "Lay me down, I have no strength in my feet. Hades is nigh at hand, and dark night steals over mine eyes." Then more familiar and less terrible came the thought of that "old man, the guide of the dead who sitteth at the oar and the helm"—who, in Montagu's mind, was inextricably mixed up with a saturnine old boatman he knew at Leith, till at last he drifted into the blessed haven of sleep.

Next day, in Horace lesson, Mr. Wycherly happened to mention that in religion he was an Epicurean, whereupon Montagu, as was his wont, asked innumerable questions, which his tutor set himself to answer as fully as possible, dilating in his pleasantly detached and im-

personal fashion on the fact that Epicureanism pure and undefiled did away with the fear of death amongst its professors; and quoted the philosopher himself to the effect that "When we are, death is not; and when death is, we are not." How that in his time the great incubus of human happiness was fear—fear of the gods, and fear of death—and that pleasure, pursued with prudence and tempered by justice and self-control, was the true end and aim of all wise men.

That what he said could by any remote possibility have any personal application to Montagu never occurred to him for a moment. He described the doctrines of Epicurus with as little expectation of their affecting the boy's attitude towards life as that the use of the prolative infinitive in his Latin prose should cause him any searchings of the heart. But he had reckoned without the minister, for Montagu, fresh from the terrors of the previous night, suddenly determined to adopt as his own a religion which seemed so singularly free from any disquieting tenets.

Edmund's curly head was never perplexed or troubled with vain imaginings or hankerings after the old gods; but equally little did he aspire to any considerable knowledge of the Shorter Catechism. Lessons of any kind he frankly detested, and as he learned by heart with difficulty, he "went through," in two senses, an inordinate number of "Shorter

Catechisms" in the cinnamon paper bindings, such as Miss Esperance was wont to provide for the instruction of her grand-nephews. Hardly ever did Edmund get any answer absolutely without mistake, except the one which replies to the question, "What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell?"—when he would respond in a dismal sort of chant: "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under His wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever." This Edmund would repeat with positive relish till sensitive Montagu shook in his shoes, and wished harder than ever that he had been born in an age when there seemed fewer possibilities of wrong-doing, followed by such appalling punishment, and youths and maidens, light-footed, crowned with garlands, trooped gaily to propitiate their easy-going gods by means of gifts.

* * * * *

On the evening of the day on which Montagu had announced his preference for the doctrines of Epicurus, Miss Esperance knocked at the door of Mr. Wycherly's study about nine o'clock. This was a most unusual proceeding on her part, for they rarely met after supper, as Miss Esperance usually went to bed about a quarter to nine.

When Mr. Wycherly saw her standing on the threshold he rose hastily and led her in

and set her in his special chair by the fire, taking up his own position on the hearthrug. The reading-lamp shone full on Miss Esperance, but his face was in shadow.

"Mr. Wycherly, I am anxious about Montagu," Miss Esperance began somewhat tremulously.

"Is he ill?" that gentleman interpolated hastily. "He seemed quite well at dinner-time."

"Oh, he's well enough in health, I think, I am thankful to think; but"—here Miss Esperance paused as if she found it somewhat difficult to broach the subject—"I am not equally confident as to his spiritual condition."

"His spiritual condition!" Mr. Wycherly repeated vaguely. "Montagu's! He is surely a very young boy to have attained to a—spiritual condition?"

"That's just it," said Miss Esperance, despair in her voice, and grave disquietude writ large upon her face. "That's just it. Would you not say that he was far too young to be assailed by doubts? Would you not expect so young a child to accept the teaching of our religion without question or rebellion? And yet Montagu"—here poor Miss Esperance again faltered, then by a mighty effort forcing herself to voice the dreadful thing—"told me to-day, when I was hearing him the Shorter Catechism, that he intended to become an Epicurean when he was grown up! What *are* we to do with him?"

It was well for Mr. Wycherly that his face was in shadow, for although his mouth remained quite grave, there were little puckers round the corners of his eyes, not wholly to be accounted for by the lines that time had drawn there. He coughed slightly, and cleared his throat. "Am I, dear Miss Esperance, to gather that you think I am in some degree to blame for Montagu's unregenerate frame of mind?" he asked gently.

"Not to blame!" she hastily ejaculated, "not to blame! But perhaps he is learning rather too much about those old days, those unenlightened heathen times, and evidently you render it all so entertaining that he gets rather carried away, and is unable to distinguish between what is mere fable and what is historical, vital truth. He is very little," she continued pleadingly; "do you think it is quite wholesome for him to learn so much mythology? Don't you think it is apt to unsettle him?"

Mr. Wycherly was silent for a minute. "Do you know," he asked suddenly, "that, with the exception of the little 'Gilt Books' you had as a child, we haven't a single child's book in the house? Perhaps I was wrong to discuss any school of philosophy with him; but, as regards mythology, I have only told Montagu such stories as are in reality the foundation of most of the child-stories that have ever been written. I don't think they have really hurt him, and such knowledge will be of use to him by-and-by."

"But why should he seem positively to dislike proper religious instruction?" persisted Miss Esperance. "I am sure that when I was a child it never occurred to me to do other than learn what was set me with the greatest reverence. Montagu's critical and rebellious attitude was undreamt of in my young days."

"Montagu has a curiously analytic mind," said Mr. Wycherly slowly, "and a passionate longing for pleasantness and gaiety. It is probably inherited. You remember dear Archie loved cheerfulness, and perhaps that poor young mother—a Cornish girl if I remember rightly—perhaps she, too, had the Southern love of colour and brightness in life. We are old people to have to do with children, Miss Esperance, and I—perhaps my aim has been too exclusively to teach Montagu to love study by making the approach to it as pleasant as possible. It is a great temptation, for I find him so docile, so receptive, so eager to please. But perhaps I have been wrong . . . though Socrates would bear me out. It is pleasant to wander in the Elysian fields with a young boy —but if you think . . ." Mr. Wycherly's voice had dropped almost to a whisper, and here he paused altogether. He seemed to have been talking to himself rather than to Miss Esperance, and to be looking past her into that pleasaunce of memory which is the priceless heritage of the old. Miss Esperance did not interrupt him, and presently he went on again.

"Perhaps the recollection of my own mother that is clearest to me is that of seeing her come dancing down a garden-path towards me. To me now, she seems so inexpressibly young, and gay, and gracious: and I have remembered her more distinctly lately, because the other day, when I was reading with Montagu that portion of the 'Odyssey' which describes Nausicaa at play among her maidens, he interrupted me to exclaim: '*My* mother was like that—so beautiful!' Now, he has never spoken to me of his mother before. I did not even know that he remembered her, and it has made me think of how distinctly I remember my own. She was not five-and-twenty when she died."

Miss Esperance sat upright in Mr. Wycherly's chair, the lamplight falling full on her troubled face. In spite of her ready sympathy—a sympathy so spontaneous that it seemed to give itself at all times independently of her volition—she felt that her dear old friend was wandering from the real question at issue. It was all very well to point out that Montagu loved beauty. She was perfectly aware of it herself, and it was not without an agreeable thrill that she recalled a little scene enacted that very evening. Montagu, according to custom, had been reading aloud to her from one of the very "Gilt Books" Mr. Wycherly mentioned, when he came upon the somewhat gratuitous and ungrammatical assertion, with regard to the fleeting character of personal beauty, "People's

faces soon alter; when they grow old nobody looks handsome."

Montagu had brought his fist down on the page with a thump, declaring indignantly, "That's nonsense! You and Mr. Wycherly are both old—and you are quite beautiful. There's a beautiful oldness as well, don't you think so, Aunt Esperance?"

The delicate colour that came and went so easily had flushed her face as Miss Esperance met the child's eager admiring eyes. "For none more than children are concerned for beauty, and, above all, for beauty in the old." She not only thought so, but knew so; but it was not the custom for women of her stamp to acknowledge that they took any sort of interest in their personal appearance, and although she was distinctly gratified, she merely shook her head, saying gravely: "What the writer would point out, Montagu, is this—that without beauty of character mere personal beauty is of but small account."

Montagu, unlike Miss Esperance, who never allowed her back to "come in contact with her chair," had lolled comfortably in his, disposed to argue the question. "I think it matters very much how people look," he said decidedly. "I hope I shall grow up to look like Achilles in the book Mr. Wycherly gave me."

Miss Esperance looked down at the thin little brown boy beside her, remarking dryly, "Well, at present, Montagu, I see small likelihood of

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we must have more grammar and less romance. I am sorry you should have been worried. It is my fault."

"No, no!" cried Miss Esperance, "I am sure that all you have done, all you are doing, is right and wise, but I—what am I to do? How can I make him see the beauty and priceless value of that knowledge without which all other knowledge is as dust and ashes?"

Mr. Wycherly turned to look at Miss Esperance, and, fresh as he was from his vision of a woman in all the radiance of her first youth and beauty, he agreed with Montagu that there is a very beautiful oldness, and that such beauty is to the understanding heart perhaps most fair of all.

She held out her hands in her eagerness, and leant forward, straining her eyes to read his face in the shadow.

"You are far more fit to deal with such subjects than I," he said hesitatingly; "but since you have done me the honour to consult me, if I might venture, I would suggest that for a boy of Montagu's temperament much dogmatic teaching is a mistake. In childhood we can only realize the Infinite through the finite. Some of us in that respect never get beyond childhood. I myself somewhat resemble Montagu, and therefore I think it might be better to defer the—er—Shorter Catechism until he is older and more able to grapple with—" Mr. Wycherly seemed to swallow

something in his throat, and the lines round his eyes deepened—"its—er—theology."

"No," said Miss Esperance firmly; "he must learn his catechism whether he understands it or not."

"Well, don't be disappointed if he doesn't understand it, dear Miss Esperance. I don't; but, then, I never read it until the other day."

There was an ominous silence for a minute. He and Miss Esperance had seldom before touched upon any religious question. Now she sighed, and said sadly: "I thought, perhaps you would be able to help me; but your advice has been, that having put my hand to the plough, I should turn back, and that I cannot do. I wish," she continued timidly, "that, should a suitable opportunity arise, you could see your way to speak to Montagu. You have such great influence over him; anything that you say would have so much weight. Don't you think that you could?"

"I cannot promise," he answered nervously. "Should a suitable opportunity arise, perhaps I might; but I cannot promise. I confess that I should have the greatest difficulty in approaching these subjects in cold blood, and I question very much whether it would be wise on my part. I have always, and purposely, avoided anything that bore upon religious instruction in my dealings with Montagu, because —well, you know, my dear Miss Esperance, that your good minister, Mr. Gloag, considers

me lamentably latitudinarian in these matters; my whole training, my whole mental outlook is so opposed . . ." Again Mr. Wycherly stopped, helplessly clasping and unclasping his long, thin hands.

Miss Esperance regarded him sadly, then sighed, saying: "I can only leave the issue in wiser hands than ours."

"And there," said Mr. Wycherly reverently, "it will be perfectly safe."

Miss Esperance rose, and as he opened the door for her he held out his hand, saying humbly: "You must try not to be angry with me: it is pure incapacity, not wilfulness, that renders me so useless as an adviser."

Miss Esperance took the proffered hand in both her own: "Are you sure that you really care?" she asked gently.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH MR. WYCHERLY HANGS UP HIS COLLEGE ARMS

" For who can always act? but he,
To whom a thousand memories call;
Not being less, but more than all,
The gentleness he seemed to be."

In Memoriam.

MR. WYCHERLY, a look of great perplexity upon his face, sat by the hearth far into the night. The lamp burned low, went out, and he sat on staring into the darkness till the dawn, cold and grey-mantled, came creeping through the unshuttered windows to find him still seated, clear-eyed and contemplative, but with the puzzled lines smoothed out of his forehead as by a kind hand. Bewilderment and self-reproach had given place to memory, as the years since the children had come passed before him in procession.

There was that strange, dreadful journey homewards from Portsmouth, the long, cramped hours of sitting, he and Miss Esperance, each with a child clasped in stiff, unfamiliar arms;

those first bewildering days when the children made all sorts of incomprehensible demands upon his experience. As he sat alone in the darkness Edmund's indignant lamentations because he could not "make a 'abbit" sounded in his ears, and his triumphant outcries when once the manufacture of the creature was accomplished.

The rabbit scenes came back to him, and a thousand others — those pretty daily doings, full of quaint solemnity, that parents take for granted, but that come with an ever-recurring shock of almost reverential pleasure upon such gentle-hearted maids and bachelors as have to do with little children late in life.

It had never ceased to fill Mr. Wycherly with amazement that Baby Edmund managed to put his spoon into his mouth and not into his eye; and he never fastened those absurd little strap shoes, that were for ever coming undone, without a slight trembling of the hands. It seemed so wonderful that he, of all people, should be permitted to officiate at these mysteries. His memory was clamorous with the children's endless demands for "stories." Picture after picture unrolled before him of attentive, eager-eyed Montagu listening with breathless interest to the tales that are old and new as life itself; of sturdy, fidgety Edmund, with the loud laugh and handsome, fearless face. . . . And in all the pictures the figure of Miss Esperance, bent now, but quick

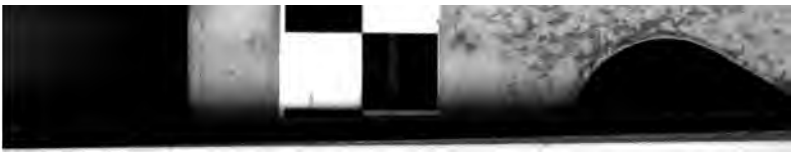
as ever to deeds of kindness, moved like the sound of music, gracious and beneficent.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck four, and the room was suddenly filled with the clear, rosy light that proclaims the advent of the day. Mr. Wycherly raised himself stiffly from his chair, and, crossing the room to Montagu's table, rearranged his already tidy pile of books with gentle, tremulous hands. As he left the room to go to bed he stood still on the threshold and looked back into it, as though to fix its image on his mind.

When Montagu came into lessons that morning his tutor was not, as usual, seated at his writing-table, but in the big chair by the fire. He was not reading, and was so evidently waiting for the little boy that Montagu, instead of going to his own seat in the window, went straight to Mr. Wycherly, who stood him between his knees, laid his hands on the child's shoulders, and looked long and earnestly into his face. Montagu, although rather puzzled by this unusual proceeding, was always patient, and waited in silence, holding the lapels of his old friend's coat the while, till he should choose to speak.

At last he said: "Montagu, tell me exactly what you meant when you told Miss Esperance that you would like to be an Epicurean when you are grown up?"

It seemed a sudden reversal of the accepted



order of things that Mr. Wycherly should ask Montagu to explain anything, and as that youth had entirely forgotten his enthusiasm for the doctrines of Epicurus directly his own fear of death had evaporated, he looked rather foolish, and mumbled:

"It seems a comfortable sort of religion."

"And do you consider our religion uncomfortable?" asked Mr. Wycherly, putting one finger under the little boy's chin and lifting the downcast face to his.

"Yes, I do," he replied with great decision, looking his teacher straight in the eyes; "most uncomfortable, with so many ways you can go to hell, and people you like, too, and no getting back when you're once there either;" and Montagu grew quite red in the face with the vehemence of his objection to these doctrines.

Mr. Wycherly withdrew his hand from under Montagu's chin and laid it on one of the little brown hands holding his coat so firmly.

"Why do you bother your head about it?" he said gently. "You may take it from me that no one, above all no little boy who tries his best to behave well and pleasantly, ever goes to hell; and as for the others — who knows? You certainly don't. Besides, do you honestly think that any wise person would choose a religion merely because it was comfortable? There is very little use in any religion that does not at times make us most uncomfortable, and spur us every day to try

and do better. Dear me, Montagu! when I was your age I believed what I was told, and never troubled my head about such things. I learned *my* catechism without a murmur."

"The Shorter Catechism?" Montagu interrupted.

"No, not that one, but it's very much the same thing," said Mr. Wycherly mendaciously.

"Well, *I* believe what I'm told," said Montagu, somewhat aggrieved by this unsympathetic attitude on the part of his old friend. "That's what makes *me* so uncomfortable. If I didn't believe it, sir, it wouldn't matter."

"I assure you, Montagu, if you ask Miss Esperance or Mr. Gloag himself—he is a most sensible man on the whole—they will both tell you that it is absurd for you to worry yourself about hell. You don't know anything about your own religion yet, far less that of the Epicureans. But now I want you to listen to me very attentively, for I have something serious to say to you. You may take absolutely on trust, either upon this or upon any other subject, *anything* that Miss Esperance may tell you. She is a far safer guide than I, or Mr. Gloag, or, indeed, anyone that you know. And, above all, I beg you to try even harder with whatever lessons she may set you than you do with mine. You *must* try to please her, to make her happy. . . ."

Mr. Wycherly paused and cleared his throat.

The earnest, puzzled face looking up into his grew suddenly dim, and the little boy felt his tutor's hand tighten on his own as he asked suddenly: "Montagu, have you ever seen anybody drunk?"

"Yes, lots of times. They look horrid, and walk crookedly, and have hoarse voices. The people on the road to Leith are often drunk."

"There was once a man, Montagu, who got into the habit of drinking more than was good for him. How and why he got into that habit does not matter; it was, at all events, no excuse. He grew worse and worse. . . . I don't think he ever looked quite like the people you mention, but I don't know. His brain was going, his friends were ashamed of him, there seemed no place for him in this world, and how should he dare face the next? He was not altogether a stupid man; he knew many things, and best of all that the weakness he encouraged was a fatal weakness, but he seemed to have no strength of mind or body to pull himself together, till an angel from heaven took him into her house and helped him and protected him against himself . . . till he was cured. It was not done quickly, and God, who gave her her great heart, alone knows what she had to bear in the doing of it."

Mr. Wycherly paused: he felt Montagu's body tremble between his knees, but the child did not speak, and the broken voice went on: "The angel was your aunt, Montagu, and I—I

was the man. And the last time I was drunk your father, not much older than you are now, brought me home."

The clock ticked loudly, and a thrush was singing on the alder-tree outside. There was no other sound in the room till Montagu, moved to a sudden passion of tears, flung himself forward into his old friend's arms, clasping him round the neck, and exclaiming between his sobs: "What does it matter? Why did you tell me? I didn't think I *could* love you any more, but I do, I do, I do!"

* * * * *

"And now," said Mr. Wycherly, some five minutes later, wiping Montagu's tear-stained face with a large, clean handkerchief, "we had better begin work, and you may write out the rules concerning the sequence of the tenses that you learned yesterday."

As Montagu settled himself at the stout, stumpy table the sun shone in on him with a radiance that made him blink. And Mr. Wycherly looked round the room with the relieved expression of one who, expecting everything to be changed, found it still blessedly the same.

He had played his great stake and won, and never was winner more happily relieved. When Montagu finished his morning's lessons and went downstairs, and Mr. Wycherly moved about his room dusting his books and rearranging the piles of papers on his desk, he

might have been heard to sing softly and with subdued but joyful emphasis certain stanzas that always concluded with a rollicking "fal la la la la lă la."

Presently he went to Montagu's window and looked out towards Arthur's Seat; but he did not see it, for in dreams he walked in his college garden beside the bastioned city wall. "I would like to see the chestnuts in bloom once more," he said softly, "and the perfect grass."

Montagu met his aunt on the staircase as he was going down, and she at once noted that his face looked tear-stained and his eyelids were swollen with crying. It was so unheard of a thing that Montagu should cry during his lessons, whatever else he might cry about, that Miss Esperance stopped him to ask anxiously what had happened. The boy crimsoned to the roots of his hair. "It was about the catechism, Aunt Esperance," he said slowly. "I am sorry; I won't be tiresome any more."

"Then he *did* speak to you?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Oh yes," said Montagu earnestly. "He made me *very* sorry;" and he fled past his aunt down the little, crooked staircase and out into the garden, for he feared what she might ask him next, and like Elsa when she discovered the gaps made by the missing books six years ago, the boy felt that here again was a sacrifice that "she maun never ken."

The long-stilled voices of habit and tradition called loudly to Mr. Wycherly, and moving as if in a dream, he went and opened a drawer in his desk and drew from it a framed picture of his college arms. The gules were faded, but the seeded Or on the Tudor roses caught the sunlight and gleamed gladly, as though rejoiced to see the brightness of the day once more. With trembling hands he took down the portrait of John Knox above the mantelpiece, and hung the arms of New College in its place.

* * * * *

In looking forward for Montagu Mr. Wycherly had learned to look back, no longer wholly in pain and shame, but sometimes in liveliest gratitude that there was so much to remember that was lovely and of good report. And the more he remembered the more did action of many sorts seem imperative; and in the July after he had confessed himself to Montagu he went back to see Oxford once more—back to the city of perhaps all others in the civilized world to fill the minds and hearts of her sons with an adoring passion of tenderness, of real filial affection—the love, that while it worships the virtues of a mother, is only strengthened by a perfect understanding of her weakness, her humanity, her beautiful inconsistency.

The great quadrangles spread themselves empty and silent in the sunlight; the fields,

untenanted of "young barbarians all at play," stretched green and peaceful to the river.

But the grey old buildings smiled their gracious welcome as of old, with that wonderful medieval friendliness that neither time nor absence can change or lessen. And just as a mother who gets her son home after long absence in a far country will talk fondly of the dear, bygone, boyish days, remembering only such things as made her glad and proud, so Oxford whispered kind, friendly things to Mr. Wycherly, and he was comforted.

The day after his arrival he went to Matins in Christ Church choir, and there seemed something peculiarly applicable in the psalms for that, the twenty-seventh day. For lo! had he not returned to his Jerusalem, well content to pray for her peace?

"Peace be within thy walls: and plenteousness within thy palaces.

"For my brethren and companions' sakes: I will wish thee prosperity.

"Yea, because of the house of the Lord our God: I will seek to do thee good."

CHAPTER XXII

VALE

"Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark;
And may there be no sadness of farewell—
When I embark!"

LORD TENNYSON.

WHEN Montagu first went to Winchester he was something of a puzzle both to masters and boys, although his housemaster, an old pupil of Mr. Wycherly, knew enough of the boy's curious upbringing to explain matters somewhat to his colleagues.

"He knows far more classics than the average sixth-form boy, and practically nothing else. Of the world he knows about as much as a child of three, and of games and other boys less than any old maid in the kingdom—a most difficult boy to place. It's a very risky experiment."

And Montagu's housemaster shook his head, for he felt worried about the child.

Contrary to everyone's expectation, however, Montagu got on wonderfully well with his

schoolfellows. Boys are tolerant enough of "queerness" if it is unaccompanied by surliness or "side." If Montagu was "green," he was also singularly obliging and good-natured. A readiness to render a good turn is a passport to favour all the world over, and when his housemaster declared Montagu to know less of other boys than any old maid in the kingdom, he made a mistake. Montagu had lived a good many years with Edmund, and healthy boyhood is very much the same all the world over.

He was always ready to give a construe or a copy of verses, and it never ceased to fill him with wonder that the boys in his own form, so much bigger and wiser and self-assertive than he, apparently found such difficulty in applying rules he could not remember to have learnt.

His accurate and old-fashioned way of expressing himself in ordinary conversation was looked upon by the boys as an especially subtle form of "rotting" or witticism; and it was quite a long time before Montagu understood how it was that his simplest remarks, offered in all good faith, were greeted with appreciative grins by his companions, who generally took it that he was parodying one of the masters. Week by week he committed fewer solecisms, and except that he seldom got into trouble over his work, which he thoroughly enjoyed, his school-life was very like that of the rest, and entirely happy.

The same term that Montagu went to Winchester, Edmund was sent to a preparatory school, also in England, and the little house at Burnhead seemed very quiet and deserted.

They had all missed the old servant Elsa—unspeakably at first; but youth is quick to accustom itself to new conditions, and Mr. Wycherly was roused to so many fresh interests and activities that he hardly realized what an important piece of the mechanism of Remote had stopped working. But Miss Esperance mourned silently and deeply for the faithful friend and servant who had ministered to her so tirelessly, and, though neither she nor Elsa knew it, ruled her so beneficently for fifty years.

After the departure of the boys, Miss Esperance grew more and more fragile, till the time came when she was fain to follow Elsa, and fare forth into the unknown with the same dignified serenity that had characterized her every act during her long life of upright dealing and beautiful self-sacrifice.

The end came in the boys' second term at school.

"I am glad the boys have both entered upon their careers," she said to Mr. Wycherly in her kind, weak voice as he sat by her bed the night she died. "I shall tell Archie what dear, good lads they are—and that poor, young mother I never saw, I can tell her how proud she would have been, how proud she may be—but

perhaps she knows;" and Miss Esperance gave a little sigh, as though she would have liked to be the first to bear this pleasing intelligence. Then, putting the thought from her as savouring of selfishness, she continued: "I'm sure she knows, but she'll be glad to hear it again—just as I am, when people praise them to me, who know so well how dear they are."

Mr. Wycherly could not speak, but his hand tightened on the weak little hand he held. "I would like to have seen Montagu again," she said wistfully. "He is such a kind boy. But it is so far, and he has only just gone back; and my bonnie wee Edmund, too. It is better as it is. I have you; and what is far more important, they have you. . . . I have indeed been wonderfully blest. I used to look forward with such dread to a lonely death-bed, with no kind hand to hold mine at the last; but the Lord has been very merciful—His merciful kindness is great towards us. . . ."

The faint, whispering voice died away into silence. The fluttering in the small, frail, old hand was stilled, and Mr. Wycherly was left alone, for Miss Esperance had gone on.

A month later Mr. Wycherly went back to Oxford. Miss Esperance left all she was possessed of to him, in trust for the boys, with the exception of a hundred pounds to Robina; and to Montagu her lace, her jewels—such humble, old-fashioned trinkets they were—and

her miniatures, "in memory of his great kindness to me when I was ill."

Mr. Wycherly took a tall old house in Holywell Street, close to his college; and there the boys always came to spend their holidays. The quaint three, so strangely linked together by fate and affection, aroused benevolent curiosity and interest in the minds of friendly dons and their families. In fact, the curious household was largely managed by energetic outsiders when the boys were at home. But they loved each other greatly, and it is that alone "which maketh light all that is burthensome, and equally bears all that is unequal. For it carrieth a burthen without being burthened, and maketh all that which is bitter sweet and savoury."

THE END

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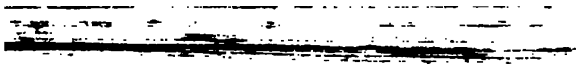

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